

## Regional power United Arab Emirates: Abu Dhabi is no longer Saudi Arabia's junior partner

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*Guido Steinberg*

# Regional Power United Arab Emirates

Abu Dhabi Is No Longer Saudi Arabia's Junior Partner



Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik  
German Institute for  
International and Security Affairs

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- Since the Arab Spring of 2011, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) have been pursuing an increasingly active foreign and security policy and have emerged as a leading regional power.
- The UAE sees the Muslim Brotherhood as a serious threat to regime stability at home, and is fighting the organisation and its affiliated groups throughout the Arab world.
- The UAE's preferred partners in regional policy are authoritarian rulers who take a critical view of political Islam and combat the Muslim Brotherhood.
- The new Emirati regional policy is also directed against Iranian expansion in the Middle East. Yet the anti-Iranian dimension of Emirati foreign policy is considerably less pronounced than its anti-Islamist dimension.
- The UAE wants to gain control of sea routes from the Gulf of Aden to the Red Sea. Since the Yemen conflict began in 2015, it has established a small maritime empire there.
- The rise of the UAE to a regional power has made the country a more important and simultaneously a more problematic policy partner for Germany and Europe.

**SWP Research Paper**

*Guido Steinberg*

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## **Regional Power United Arab Emirates. Abu Dhabi Is No Longer Saudi Arabia's Junior Partner**

Since the Arab Spring of 2011, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) have been pursuing an increasingly active foreign and security policy and have become an important regional power. Together with Saudi Arabia they intervened in Bahrain in March 2011, when the Khalifa family feared that a Shiite protest movement might develop into a threat to its rule. In July 2013, the Emirates — again in conjunction with Riyadh — supported the coup d'état of the Egyptian military led by General Abd al- Fattah al-Sisi. In spring 2015, Saudi Arabia and the UAE launched a war against the Houthi rebels in Yemen; in June 2017 the two neighbours imposed a blockade of Qatar. The Emirates also intervened in the conflict in Libya on the side of General Khalifa Haftar, who has been trying to unite the country under himself since 2014. Since 2017, the Emirates have benefited from good relations with the Trump administration, which resolutely supports the regional policy of the Emirati leadership and, like the latter, pursues an aggressive anti-Iranian line. It was not until mid-2019 that disagreements became apparent, when the Emirates opted for a more cautious policy towards Iran.

All these events demonstrate that the UAE is no longer Saudi Arabia's junior partner, as was the case up to 2011 and partly beyond. Since then, there have been more and more reports that joint foreign policy projects between the two partners (such as the Yemen war and the blockade of Qatar) were initiated by Abu Dhabi. It is becoming increasingly clear that the Emirates have ceased to be a secondary player in the Middle East, unable to compete with regional heavyweights Egypt, Turkey and Iran. Rather, the country is now exerting influence far beyond its own borders. Most recently, it demonstrated by its partial withdrawal from Yemen in 2019 that it is capable of pursuing an independent course vis-à-vis Saudi Arabia as well.

However, these observations raise the question of what the guidelines and priorities of the Emirates' foreign policy are. Do the various activities of the UAE vis-à-vis Qatar, Yemen, Egypt, Libya, and in the conflict with Iran follow a strategy, or are they more or



less opportunistic reactions to the crisis in the Arab world since 2011? The thesis put forward in this study is that the Emirates' new regional policy, despite many reactive elements, is characterised by three clearly recognisable guidelines:

- First, the UAE is fighting Islamists in the region because they have pinpointed the Muslim Brotherhood — the largest and most important movement of political Islam in the Arab world — as a serious domestic threat to regime stability. The leadership in Abu Dhabi is convinced that the transnational structure of the Islamist group is dangerous and that, if the Brotherhood gained power in countries like Egypt, it would try to mobilise its followers in the Gulf States and especially in the UAE against their governments. This is why the Emirati leadership supports authoritarian governments or military forces in Egypt, Libya and — albeit to a lesser extent — Sudan.
- Second, the new Emirati regional policy is directed against Iranian expansion in the Middle East. Since 2015, when the UAE and Saudi Arabia started a war against the Houthi rebels, who are loosely allied with Iran, Yemen has been the main scene of this conflict from Abu Dhabi's perspective. However, the anti-Iranian dimension of the Emirates' foreign policy is much less pronounced than its aversion to the Islamists.
- Third, Abu Dhabi is very interested in controlling the sea routes from the Gulf of Aden to the Red Sea. The UAE has taken over several Yemeni ports and islands since 2015 and has established bases in Assab in Eritrea and Berbera in Somaliland. It has thus established a small maritime empire between the Gulf of Oman and the Red Sea, and established itself as a regional power in the south-western Arabian Peninsula and the Horn of Africa.

The priorities of the leadership in Abu Dhabi became very clear in July 2019, when the UAE withdrew the majority of its troops from Yemen, leaving most positions to local allies. This move was largely motivated by the UAE's concerns over a further escalation of the conflict with Iran. In May and June, the Iranians had sabotaged and hijacked oil tankers — some of them near the Emirati coast — and thus demonstrated the Emirates' vulnerability. This was followed by a cautious relaxation of relations with Iran, while the fight against the Islamists and their supporters in the region continued unabated.

# Decision-making Processes in the UAE

Three main developments inside the Emirates have initiated this shift towards an active and often aggressive regional policy in the UAE. First, the rise of Mohammed Bin Zayed al-Nahyan, the Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi, to strong man of the federation. Since 2003 Bin Zayed has become the main architect of the Emirates' regional power politics. Second, the impact of an internal UAE power shift, as a result of which the more commercially orientated Dubai has lost influence and Abu Dhabi has dominated decision-making processes in foreign and security policy. And third, since 2011 the Emirati government has relied on domestic repression, such that it no longer has to fear internal resistance to its foreign policy.

## The Ascent of Mohammed Bin Zayed

Mohammed Bin Zayed is the undisputed leader in Abu Dhabi and the UAE. The fact that he was able to assume this position is primarily due to his father Zayed Bin Sultan al-Nahyan, the long-time Emir of Abu Dhabi and President of the UAE (officially 1971–2004), who appointed him deputy crown prince in November 2003. When the father died a year later, his eldest son Khalifa Bin Zayed (born 1948) succeeded him in both offices, and Mohammed (born 1961) became crown prince. A possible reason for Zayed preferring his third eldest son (of a total of 19) was the lobbying by his mother, Fatima Bint Mubarak al-Ketbi, who is thought to have been the former ruler's favourite wife and to have had special influence over him.<sup>1</sup>

Khalifa suffered from serious health problems early on, and Mohammed Bin Zayed quickly took over

day-to-day business. Since December 2004, he has headed the Executive Council (al-Majlis al-Tanfidihi), Abu Dhabi's central decision-making body. From this position, he has accelerated the emirate's modernisation.<sup>2</sup> After suffering a stroke in January 2014, Khalifa withdrew from public life. He will not return to the political stage, so it is only a matter of time before Mohammed Bin Zayed succeeds his brother as Emir of Abu Dhabi. It is an open question as to whether he can also take over the presidency of the UAE.<sup>3</sup>

Mohammed Bin Zayed considers himself a military man. After his training at the British Military Academy Sandhurst, he became commander of the UAE Air Force in the late 1980s, and chief of the UAE General Staff in 1993. His most important task in the 1990s was the integration of the Emirati armed forces, since it was not until 1996 that Dubai's and Ras al-Khaimah's troops, the Dubai Defence Force and the Ras al-Khaimah National Guard, became a part of the UAE's joint military.<sup>4</sup> After the 1990–1991 Gulf War, the UAE very purposely expanded its armed forces. It formed a small but increasingly professional and powerful military force of 63,000 troops, thus laying the foundation for a more active foreign policy from 2011 onwards. Within the joint armed forces, the Presidential Guard (Haras al-Ri'asa), which was only established in 2010, and the Air Force, which is considered the strongest in the region after the Israeli one, stand out. The army has limited operational

<sup>2</sup> For details of the function and composition of the Executive Council, see Christopher Davidson, *Abu Dhabi: Oil and Beyond* (London, 2009), 124.

<sup>3</sup> Simon Henderson and Kristian C. Ulrichsen, *MBZ and the Future Leadership of the United Arab Emirates*, Policy Note 65 (Washington, D.C.: The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, July 2019), 4, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/uploads/Documents/pubs/PolicyNote65-HendersonCoates.pdf> (accessed 17 January 2020).

<sup>4</sup> Kristian Coates Ulrichsen, *The United Arab Emirates: Power, Politics, and Policymaking* (London and New York, 2017), 63–65.

<sup>1</sup> "UAE Succession Update: The Post-Zayed Scenario" (cable 04ABUDHABI3410\_a), 28 September 2004, *WikiLeaks*, [https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/04ABUDHABI3410\\_a.html](https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/04ABUDHABI3410_a.html) (accessed 17 January 2020).

capability due to restricted recruitment opportunities (the Emirates only have about one million citizens), but the shortage of personnel is partly compensated by the recruitment of mercenaries.<sup>5</sup>

**Since the mid-2000s, Bin Zayed has been responsible for the UAE's security and foreign policy.**

In 2005, the crown prince was promoted to UAE deputy defence minister. In fact, however, he acts as head of the ministry, since the actual incumbent, Mohammed Bin Rashid Al Maktoum, the Emir of Dubai (who also serves as UAE prime minister), limits himself to ceremonial duties, focuses on administering Dubai and its business interests, and shows no interest in security policy. Since the mid-2000s, it is therefore primarily Bin Zayed who has been responsible for UAE security and defence policy, as well as its foreign policy. He benefits from good relations with Mohammed Bin Rashid.<sup>6</sup>

The crown prince's most important allies in Abu Dhabi are a group of five full brothers, who are also called Bani Fatima (Tribe of Fatima, after their mother). From 2004 onwards, the power of this part of the family increased at the expense of twelve half-brothers, who from then on were only marginally represented in Abu Dhabi politics. Besides Mohammed Bin Zayed, the Bani Fatima consists of his brothers Hamdan, Hazza, Tahnoun, Mansour and Abdullah. All five have benefited from the rise of their full brother; Mansour (born in 1970) is considered particularly influential. Since 2009 he has served as deputy prime minister of the UAE and at the same time as minister for presidential affairs. Abdullah (born 1972) was appointed UAE foreign minister in 2006. Tahnoun (b. 1968) has served as national security advisor to the UAE since 2015. Hazza (b. 1963) has been the emir's security advisor since 2006, with a focus on internal security. Hamdan was formerly deputy prime minister, but seems to have lost his importance.<sup>7</sup>

By the end of the 2000s, Bin Zayed had consolidated his power in Abu Dhabi. At that time he was already steering the Emirates' domestic and foreign policy. Apart from his military background, his most prominent characteristics were his distrust of Islamists of all kinds and his hostility towards Iran. In US embassy reports of the 2000s, published by *WikiLeaks*, Mohammed Bin Zayed and his brothers are repeatedly quoted as rejecting the Muslim Brotherhood. The crown prince was apparently concerned above all about the stability of the Emirates, which in his view is threatened by this transnationally active organisation. In 2004 he is even said to have stated that the Emirates were at "war with the Muslim Brotherhood".<sup>8</sup> Bin Zayed's position vis-à-vis the Islamic Republic of Iran has also been the subject of several reports. His hostility culminated in a 2007 statement in which he openly called for a military strike against Iranian targets.<sup>9</sup> Both causes became constants of the crown prince's policy and gained in importance from 2011 onwards.

## The Centralisation of Power in Abu Dhabi

After 2009, Mohammed Bin Zayed and his brothers also benefited from an internal Emirates power shift, which facilitated centralising the foreign and security policy decision-making process in Abu Dhabi. The reason for this was the relative loss of influence of Dubai, which had directed the fate of the UAE during the first four decades of the federation's existence on almost equal terms with Abu Dhabi.

The United Arab Emirates is a federation of seven Emirates that are independent, at least in theory. Since the founding of the UAE, Abu Dhabi and Dubai, the two largest, most populous and most resource-rich emirates, have dominated. Abu Dhabi has had advantages from the very beginning, as it has considerably more oil than Dubai. Oil production in Dubai peaked as early as 1991 at 410,000 barrels per

5 Mark Mazzetti and Emily B. Hager, "Secret Desert Force Set up by Blackwater's Founder", *The New York Times*, 14 May 2011, <https://www.nytimes.com/2011/05/15/world/middleeast/15prince.html> (accessed 17 January 2020).

6 On the good relations between Bin Zayed and Bin Rashid, see "UAE Succession Update: The Post-Zayed Scenario" (cable 04ABUDHABI3410\_a) (see note 1).

7 Ulrichsen, *The United Arab Emirates* (see note 4), 70. On the early careers of Hamdan, Hazza, Tahnoun, Mansour and

Abdullah see Davidson, *Abu Dhabi* (see note 2), 99–100 and 104–105.

8 "UAE Minimizing Influence of Islamist Extremists" (cable 04ABUDHABI4061\_a), 10 November 2004, *WikiLeaks*, [https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/04ABUDHABI4061\\_a.html](https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/04ABUDHABI4061_a.html) (accessed 17 January 2020).

9 "U/S Burns' January 22 Meeting with Abu Dhabi Crown Prince and UAE Foreign Minister" (cable 07ABUDHABI97\_a), 24 January 2007, *WikiLeaks*, [https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/07ABUDHABI97\\_a.html](https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/07ABUDHABI97_a.html) (accessed 17 January 2020).

day; it has since declined steadily.<sup>10</sup> Abu Dhabi, on the other hand, has more than 90 percent of the country's oil reserves, the seventh largest in the world. Even when the UAE was founded, Abu Dhabi was already producing significantly more oil than all the other emirates combined. The fact that Abu Dhabi was also responsible for most of the UAE's budget in the early days had a direct impact on the balance of power between the two emirates. Since 1971, Abu Dhabi has provided the president of the UAE, who is elected every five years by the seven rulers, and is allowed to hold six ministerial posts, including the ministries of the interior, foreign affairs and information. Dubai, on the other hand, has appointed the vice president, the prime minister and three ministers (defence, finance and economics) since the founding of the state. The other emirates provide the remaining eight ministers.<sup>11</sup> They accept the unequal distribution of power so as to secure a share of Abu Dhabi's oil revenues.

The Abu Dhabi leadership has always worked to centralise power as much as possible, while Dubai has led the resistance against such tendencies. Despite the unequal distribution of oil revenues, Dubai was able to hold its own against the largest member of the federation for a long time because it adopted an alternative development model early on. Since the 1960s, the emirate had been the most important trading centre in the southern Gulf; through investments in logistics infrastructure in the 1990s and 2000s, it has developed into the commercial capital of the entire Middle East. The port of Jebel Ali, opened in 1979, is the largest container transshipment centre between China and Europe; Dubai Airport is the third largest in the world in terms of passenger traffic (2018); and the city is the region's financial centre.<sup>12</sup> In the 2000s, Dubai experienced an unprecedented construction boom. The emirate's leaders have attempted to turn Dubai into a global brand and attract foreign investors with spectacular projects such as the Burj Khalifa skyscraper.

### Over the last decade, UAE policy has been increasingly shaped by security considerations.

Dubai's policy continues to bear the stamp of Mohammed Bin Rashid Al Maktoum, who, as crown prince, became the de facto ruler of the emirate from 1995 onwards, before ascending the throne in 2006. At first, it seemed that the rise of Mohammed Bin Zayed and Mohammed Bin Rashid went hand in hand, since the ruler of Dubai, as prime minister and vice-president of the UAE, confidently insisted on a strong role in the emirate's domestic and foreign policy, and brought important advisors into key positions.<sup>13</sup> Dubai, like Abu Dhabi, benefited from high revenues from oil exports during the long period of high prices that began in 2002 and did not end until the summer of 2014. However, the boom in Dubai came to an end in 2009, when the consequences of the 2008 financial crisis affected the state-owned company Dubai World, which had invested primarily in the desert city's most prominent real estate projects, and thus accumulated debts of \$59 billion. Dubai is said to have had debts of at least \$80 billion at the time.<sup>14</sup> Only a cash injection from Abu Dhabi of \$20 billion saved Dubai World from insolvency.<sup>15</sup> There is no public knowledge of any specific quid-pro-quo or other demands by Abu Dhabi, but this assumption of debt further tipped the balance of power in the Emirates in its favour. The UAE's policy was increasingly determined by security considerations, with trade and economy having to take a back seat. While there is some evidence that Mohammed Bin Rashid was critical of key policy decisions made by Bin Zayed, such as the boycott of Qatar in 2017,<sup>16</sup> he no longer had the power to impose his foreign policy perspective.

<sup>10</sup> It is expected that Dubai's reserves will be completely depleted by around 2030, see "Oil in Dubai: History and Timeline", *Gulf News*, 4 February 2010, <https://gulfnews.com/business/energy/oil-in-dubai-history-timeline-1.578333> (accessed 17 January 2020).

<sup>11</sup> Ulrichsen, *The United Arab Emirates* (see note 4), 54.

<sup>12</sup> Jim Krane, *City of Gold. Dubai and the Dream of Capitalism* (New York, 2009), 80.

<sup>13</sup> Ulrichsen, *The United Arab Emirates* (see note 4), 70.

<sup>14</sup> Robert F. Worth, Heather Timmons and Landon Thomas, Jr., "Crisis Puts Focus on Dubai's Complex Relationship with Abu Dhabi", *The New York Times*, 29 November 2009, <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/11/30/business/global/30dubai.html> (accessed 17 January 2020).

<sup>15</sup> Kristian Coates Ulrichsen, "Evolving Power Dynamics in the United Arab Emirates", *Baker Institute Blog*, 1 March 2016, <http://blog.bakerinstitute.org/2016/03/01/evolving-power-dynamics-in-the-united-arab-emirates/> (accessed 17 January 2020).

<sup>16</sup> Henderson and Ulrichsen, *MBZ and the Future Leadership of the United Arab Emirates* (see note 3), 9.

## The Authoritarian Security State

Since 2011 – 2012, the centralisation of power in Abu Dhabi, and more importantly in the person of Mohammed Bin Zayed, has been accompanied by a trend towards a comprehensive and uncompromising authoritarianism of the kind that can also be seen in post-Arab-Spring Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Bahrain. In the UAE, this intensified (though mostly non-violent) repression primarily affects the Muslim Brotherhood, which until 2012 was the only organised opposition in the Emirates, and which is regarded by Mohammed Bin Zayed as the most serious threat to domestic political stability. Now that the Islamists and the main liberal voices in the country have been eliminated, the crown prince no longer has to fear public opposition to his decisions.

Al-Islah (“reform”), as the Muslim Brotherhood offshoot in the Emirates calls itself, benefited from cautious government support at the time of its creation in the 1970s. However, relations between the group and the UAE leadership deteriorated in the 1980s and 1990s because the Brotherhood expanded its social influence and developed into a serious opposition movement. An Emirati author even called the UAE education system and judiciary a “state within a state”, since the Muslim Brotherhood dominated student councils and professional lawyers’ and teachers’ associations.<sup>17</sup> The Islamists also became politically more active beyond these areas, not only protesting against the Westernisation of the Emirates, the loss of indigenous values, and widespread corruption, but also pushing for political reforms. The organisation’s activities were therefore already being curtailed in the 1990s.<sup>18</sup>

Following his appointment as deputy crown prince in 2003, Mohammed Bin Zayed addressed the problem posed by al-Islah, and Abu Dhabi and Dubai tightened their grip. To counter their influence over the education sector, Muslim Brothers who worked there were transferred to other posts, dismissed, or even imprisoned in the years that followed.<sup>19</sup> Overall, the Muslim Brotherhood’s reach was restricted,

though initially without any large-scale persecution. This initial restraint was probably mainly due to the continued protection of the Islamists by the ruler of Ras al-Khaimah, Saqr Bin Mohammed al-Qasimi (ruled 1948 – 2010), who enjoyed special respect among the other sheikhs because he was the last surviving representative of the founding generation of the Emirates. When Saqr al-Qasimi died in 2010, Mohammed Bin Zayed finally had carte blanche for a crackdown. The occasion was the Arab Spring of 2011.

It was above all the rise of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt that prompted Abu Dhabi’s leaders to take a tougher line. The accusation repeatedly made against the Islamists in the Emirates was that they belonged to a transnational network that operated in secret and were loyal to its supreme leader in Egypt, not to the UAE.<sup>20</sup> Nevertheless, the first measures taken by the government in 2011 did not affect al-Islah, but liberal reformers. In March 2011, 113 intellectuals petitioned Khalifa Bin Zayed and the other UAE emirs, demanding broader political participation. Al-Islah members were among the signatories. In early April, five leading signatories of the petition – none of whom belonged to al-Islah – were arrested; in November 2011, they were sentenced to several years’ imprisonment, but pardoned shortly thereafter (only to be re-arrested later in some cases).<sup>21</sup>

### **The crackdown on the Muslim Brotherhood is just one facet of Abu Dhabi’s efforts to quash any opposition within the UAE.**

Not until spring 2012, shortly after the Islamists had won the parliamentary elections in Egypt, did the persecution of the Muslim Brotherhood begin in all Emirates. In March, seven prominent al-Islah members who had signed the petition were arrested; in April, Sultan Bin Kayed al-Qasimi, the al-Islah chairman, followed.<sup>22</sup> By the end of 2012, the authorities had arrested 94 members of al-Islah, 69 of whom were sentenced in July 2013 to prison terms of between

17 Sultan Al Qassemi, “The Brothers and the Gulf”, *Foreign Policy* (online), 14 December 2012, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2012/12/14/the-brothers-and-the-gulf/> (accessed 17 January 2020).

18 Courtney Freer, *Rentier Islamism: The Influence of the Muslim Brotherhood in Gulf Monarchies* (Oxford, 2018), 103.

19 Ibid., 167.

20 Al Qassemi, “The Brothers and the Gulf” (see note 17).

21 Freer, *Rentier Islamism* (see note 18), 133.

22 Simeon Kerr “UAE Islamist Detained in Ruler’s Palace”, *Financial Times*, 25 April 2012, <https://www.ft.com/content/f6aaa4cc-8e9e-11e1-ac13-00144feab49a> (accessed 17 January 2020).

seven and 15 years for an alleged coup attempt.<sup>23</sup> The prosecutor's office claimed the country's national security was being "threatened by a group with connections to foreign organisations and machinations."<sup>24</sup> The government also announced that the organisation had an armed wing and was planning a coup d'état to revive the caliphate. Further sentences against Emirati and Egyptian Muslim Brothers followed, accompanied by a massive public campaign against al-Islah.<sup>25</sup>

During this phase, the leadership in Abu Dhabi was focused on the complete destruction of the Muslim Brotherhood in the Emirates. This became evident in November 2014 at the latest, when the UAE published a terrorism list on which al-Islah and the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood were listed alongside groups such as al-Qaida and "Islamic State" (IS) – even though in the case of al-Islah there were no indications of terrorist violence.<sup>26</sup> Even the political activities of the organisation had always remained very moderate, and it was not working towards a coup d'état. Rather, the crackdown on al-Islah was a facet of Abu Dhabi's efforts to quash any political opposition in the UAE. The Emirates' security authorities used state-of-the-art surveillance technology to track down and silence even harmless critics; and the country's intelligence services were greatly expanded.<sup>27</sup>

23 "UAE Sentences 'Coup Plotters' to Jail", *The Guardian*, 2 July 2013, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/jul/02/uae-sentences-coup-plotters-jail> (accessed 17 January 2020).

24 Quoted in Freer, *Rentier Islamism* (see note 18), 136.

25 Ibid.

26 "UAE Publishes List of Terrorist Organisations", *Gulf News*, 15 November 2014, <https://gulfnews.com/uae/government/uae-publishes-list-of-terrorist-organisations-1.1412895> (accessed 17 January 2020).

27 David D. Kirkpatrick and Azam Ahmed, "Hacking a Prince, an Emir and a Journalist to Impress a Client", *The New York Times*, 31 August 2018, <http://www.nytimes.com/2018/08/31/world/middleeast/hacking-united-arab-emirates-nso-group.html>; Jenna McLaughlin, "Deep Pockets, Deep Cover", *Foreign Policy* (online), 21 December 2017, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2017/12/21/deep-pockets-deep-cover-the-uae-is-paying-ex-cia-officers-to-build-a-spy-empire-in-the-gulf/> (both accessed 17 January 2020).



# Old Alliances Revised

The most important constants of the UAE's foreign and security policy are its alliances with the USA and Saudi Arabia. Although the Emirates have been acting more independently since 2011, the new policy would not be possible without a continued alliance with the USA, on whose protection the rich but small and sparsely populated country and its energy exports can count in the event of conflict. This alliance also remained intact when relations were clouded by the Emirati leadership's dissatisfaction with the Obama administration policy on the Arab Spring and Iran. With the inauguration of President Donald Trump, the relationship quickly improved again because his administration, like the UAE, was committed to an anti-Iranian policy, and saw the Emirates as an important pillar of its Middle East policy. Alongside Israel and Saudi Arabia, the UAE is now the US's closest ally in the Middle East.

Saudi Arabia, on the other hand, had already become a strategic partner in the Emirates' new regional policy during the Obama presidencies. Riyadh and Abu Dhabi have in fact been close allies since the formation of the UAE in 1971. But the young state remained a junior partner of Saudi Arabia until the 2000s, generally following the policies of its bigger neighbour. This only changed with the rise of Mohammed Bin Zayed, who from 2011 increasingly pushed for decisive joint action in the region. He found a congenial partner in the Saudi Arabian Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman Al Saud, who from January 2015 onwards gradually became the main leader of Saudi Arabian policy. In some cases (for example in Yemen and Qatar), the UAE leadership seems to have been the driving force behind joint regional policy initiatives.

## The UAE and the USA

The USA became the Emirates' protective power in the 1980s. How necessary this alliance was for the continued existence of the UAE was apparent even at its founding. In November 1971, Iran used the

opportunity offered by the British withdrawal from the Gulf region to take control of three strategically important islands near the Strait of Hormuz, which had until then been part of the Emirates' territory: the two Tunb islands and Abu Musa. This event, among others, showed the Emiratis that they were dependent on protection by a foreign power since they found themselves in the neighbourhood of much stronger and often aggressive states, such as Iran, Iraq and Saudi Arabia.

This role was assumed by the USA from the 1980s onwards. It expanded its presence in the Persian Gulf after the Iranian Revolution in 1979 – which meant the loss of the Shah as its most important ally in the region – and the beginning of the Iran-Iraq war in 1980, and from then on also protected the UAE. However, the 1990–1991 Gulf War was a turning point in American-Emirati relations: Iraq's invasion of Kuwait on 2 August 1990 showed the UAE how vulnerable the smaller Gulf states were to military aggression by a neighbouring country. To protect themselves, the Emirates, like its neighbours, therefore endeavoured in the years that followed to expand the US presence on their territory. The UAE concluded a bilateral security agreement with Washington in July 1994.<sup>28</sup> The USA received long-term regulated access to Emirati air bases and ports, and in return (at least implicitly) promised to protect the UAE from external enemies. That the government in Abu Dhabi at the time still feared public criticism of its close ties with the USA (both domestically and from Iran) was shown above all by the fact that the text of the agreement remained secret at the Emirates' request.

<sup>28</sup> Sami G. Hajjar, *U.S. Military Presence in the Gulf: Challenges and Prospects* (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College, March 2002), 20, <https://publications.armywarcollege.edu/pubs/1495.pdf> (accessed 17 January 2020).

## **The UAE military has participated in every major US operation in the broader Middle East since 1991.**

While the UAE was initially one US ally among many in the Gulf, it became an increasingly important partner in the 1990s and 2000s. This was due in part to the port of Jebel Ali, which developed into the US Navy's most frequently used base outside the United States, and the Al Dhafra Air Force Base, which became key for US wars in the region. From the late 1990s onwards, the UAE also attempted to convince its ally of its relevance by cooperating on a broad and intensive basis. Thus, the Emirati military has participated in every major US mission in the broader Middle East since 1991: in the 1991 Gulf War and in the operations in Somalia in 1992; in Kosovo in 1999; in Afghanistan since 2003; in Libya in 2011; and in Syria (against IS) in 2014–2015. Only participation in the 2003 Iraq War was vehemently rejected by the Emirates.<sup>29</sup> For the Emirati military, these numerous missions meant a constant learning process, which has had a positive effect on its efficiency and professionalism.

The UAE's participation in the often controversial US military operations in Arab and Muslim countries has been an invaluable asset for the USA. It allowed Washington to state that at least one Arab-Muslim state was also involved in the action. Moreover, the government in Abu Dhabi sent not only its military, but also Emirati aid organisations, which tried to win over the population with large sums of money. An important example of this is Afghanistan, where the UAE has not only invested hundreds of millions of US dollars in humanitarian aid and development projects to stabilise the Afghan state, but has at times also provided a small contingent of special forces, which were deployed against the Taliban in the particularly dangerous south after 2003. Between 2012 and 2014, the Emirates deployed six F16 fighter planes to support ground operations.<sup>30</sup> UAE units also remained in

Afghanistan when most other US allies gradually withdrew their troops after 2014.<sup>31</sup>

The UAE were particularly easy to win over for the fight against Islamist terrorists, because their leaders' aversion to religious extremism also extended to this form of political Islam. This is why the Emirati Air Force participated in the US-led coalition against IS in Syria in 2014 and 2015, with Emirati fighter planes flying more attacks in those years than any other participating country except the United States. Furthermore, the UAE made its bases available not only to the US, but also to France and Australia so that they could participate in the attacks.<sup>32</sup> Only after the outbreak of the Yemen war in March 2015 did the UAE reduce its involvement in the fight against IS.

In parallel with these campaigns, however, Emirati reservations emerged about US policy in the Middle East. Abu Dhabi already considered the 2003 Iraq war a serious mistake.<sup>33</sup> Like the Saudi Arabian leadership, the Emirati princes feared that the military intervention would increase Iran's power in Iraq and/or trigger a civil war, both of which could have a destabilising effect on the region. When Shiite Islamists close to Iran won the 2005 Iraqi parliamentary elections and a bloody civil war broke out in February 2006, the UAE saw its predictions confirmed, but had no opportunity to influence the situation in the country. Its main concern now was that a premature American withdrawal would aggravate the situation, so it limited itself to urging the US administration to refrain from a rapid withdrawal as proposed by the Baker-Hamilton Commission in 2006.<sup>34</sup>

## **A turning point in the UAE's perception of US policy was the fall of President Mubarak of Egypt in early 2011.**

However, the turning point in the Emirati perception of US policy was the overthrow of Hosni Muba-

<sup>29</sup> Rajiv Chandrasekaran, "In the UAE, the United States Has a Quiet, Potent Ally Nicknamed 'Little Sparta'", *The Washington Post*, 9 November 2014, <https://wapo.st/2waDIWh> (accessed 17 January 2020).

<sup>30</sup> Kenneth Katzman, *The United Arab Emirates (UAE): Issues for U.S. Policy* (Washington, D.C.: Congressional Research Service [CRS], 1 November 2019), 15, <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/mideast/RS21852.pdf> (accessed 17 January 2020).

<sup>31</sup> See, e.g., "UAE to Boost Troop Presence in Afghanistan for Training: Officials", *Reuters*, 8 June 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-afghanistan-emirates/uae-to-boost-troop-presence-in-afghanistan-for-training-officials-idUSKCN1J41E7> (accessed 17 January 2020).

<sup>32</sup> Katzman, *The United Arab Emirates* (see note 30), 13.

<sup>33</sup> Ulrichsen, *The United Arab Emirates* (see note 4), 185.

<sup>34</sup> See, e.g., the statements made by Sheikh Khalifa Ibn Zayed in a 2007 interview, "We look forward to make the Arab Summit a turning point in joint Arab action", *Organisation of Asia-Pacific News Agencies*, 28 March 2007.



rak in early 2011. Although the Egyptian president had been a loyal ally of the US since taking office in 1981, President Obama dropped him shortly after the protests began. On 1 February 2011, he even announced in front of White House cameras that Mubarak's rule had to end, thus taking sides with the protesters.<sup>35</sup> This was a severe shock for UAE rulers, forcing them to conclude that they could not count on Washington's help in the event of an internal threat either. The UAE government also saw these events as an indication that the US intended to withdraw gradually from the region, and decided to confront its opponents without the support of its powerful ally. A first example of the Abu Dhabi government's new determination was Bahrain, which Emirati police and Saudi Arabian troops entered in March 2011 after very short notice to the US to support the Khalifa ruling family in crushing protests by the Shiite majority.<sup>36</sup>

Disagreements with the Obama administration continued until the end of 2016. The leadership in Abu Dhabi officially welcomed the conclusion of the nuclear agreement with Iran in July 2015, merely noting that Tehran would continue its expansion policy in the Middle East regardless of the agreement, and expressing concern that the US might lose interest in containment.<sup>37</sup> Behind the scenes, however, the UAE vehemently rejected the US approach towards Iran, calling the Obama administration naïve and accusing it of leaving the entire region to the Iranians.<sup>38</sup> The discontent of Mohammed Bin Zayed and his followers with Obama and his Middle East policy grew in 2015; in turn, the US president increasingly marked his distance from the monarchs in the Gulf. Obama's goal was apparently to create a balance between Iran and its opponents in the Gulf. In an interview with the *Atlantic* in March 2016, he said the Saudis had to "share" the Middle East with their Iranian enemies: "The competition between the Saudis and the Iranians — which has helped to feed

proxy wars and chaos in Syria and Iraq and Yemen — requires us to say to our friends as well as to the Iranians that they need to find an effective way to share the neighborhood and institute some sort of cold peace."<sup>39</sup> Although Obama did not specifically address the UAE, it was clear in Abu Dhabi that he did mean the Emirates among others.

UAE leaders reacted with ever more open criticism of Obama and his policies. Although Mohammed Bin Zayed maintained close personal relations with Obama throughout his presidency, his ambassador in Washington, Yousef Al Otaiba, was already quoted in 2014 as saying: "You're still a superpower — but you no longer know how to act like one".<sup>40</sup> At that time Otaiba, a close confidant of Mohammed Bin Zayed, and ambassador to the USA since 2008, was one of the best-known diplomatic figures in Washington, meaning that his statements were widely noticed.<sup>41</sup> Republican politicians in particular shared the positions represented by Otaiba.

In the course of 2016, the UAE representative in Washington also established contacts with the Trump campaign. The future president's son-in-law, Jared Kushner, met with Otaiba on several occasions from spring 2016 onwards to discuss the Middle East. The *New York Times* later wrote that the Emirati had soon positioned himself as "an informal adviser on the region to Mr Kushner."<sup>42</sup> In December 2016, Moham-

39 Jeffrey Goldberg, "The Obama Doctrine. The U.S. President Talks through His Hardest Decisions about America's Role in the World", *The Atlantic*, April 2016, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2016/04/the-obama-doctrine/471525/#5> (accessed 17 January 2020).

40 Quoted in David Rothkopf, "National Insecurity. Can Obama's Foreign Policy Be Saved?" *Foreign Policy*, 9 September 2014, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2014/09/09/national-insecurity/>. The article does not mention Otaiba by name. However, the description of the source alone makes it clear who is responsible for the statement, and Otaiba left no doubt about his authorship of the quote; see also Ryan Grim and Akbar Shahid Ahmed, "His Town", *Huffingtonpost*, n.d., <https://highline.huffingtonpost.com/articles/en/his-town/> (both accessed 17 January 2020).

41 On Otaiba, see "The UAE's Young New Ambassador: MBZ's Right Hand Man Gets Ready to Take on Washington" (cable 08ABUDHABI392\_a), 27 March 2008, *WikiLeaks*, [https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/08ABUDHABI392\\_a.html](https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/08ABUDHABI392_a.html) (accessed 17 January 2020).

42 David D. Kirkpatrick, Ben Hubbard, Mark Landler and Mark Mazzetti, "The Wooing of Jared Kushner: How the Saudis Got a Friend in the White House", *The New York Times*, 8 December 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/12/08/>

35 Helene Cooper and Robert F. Worth, "In Arab Spring, Obama Finds a Sharp Test", *The New York Times*, 24 September 2014, <https://www.nytimes.com/2012/09/25/us/politics/arab-spring-proves-a-harsh-test-for-obamas-diplomatic-skill.html> (accessed 17 January 2020).

36 Ibid.

37 Katzman, *The United Arab Emirates* (see note 30), 10f.

38 Dexter Filkins: "A Saudi Prince's Quest to Remake the Middle East", *The New Yorker*, 9 April 2018, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2018/04/09/a-saudi-princes-quest-to-remake-the-middle-east> (accessed 17 January 2020).

med Bin Zayed himself travelled to New York to meet with the newly elected Trump and his advisors. According to press reports, the interlocutors were quick to discuss their shared anti-Iranian stance, and the meeting developed into a lively exchange on future policy towards Tehran.<sup>43</sup> These first personal contacts developed over the next few months into an increasingly close cooperation between Washington and Abu Dhabi.

**The Trump administration pursued a goal of forging an anti-Iranian alliance that would include the UAE as a key partner.**

The trust underpinning the cooperation between the Trump administration and the UAE government was shown by the conclusion of a new security agreement, confirmed by Defence Secretary James Mattis and Mohammed Bin Zayed in May 2017. In contrast to the 1994 agreement, the contents were public and mainly concerned the stationing of US military in the UAE, measures to train the Emirati armed forces, and joint manoeuvres. The US presence in the Emirates is now greater than ever. It currently has some 5,000 troops stationed at the Al Dhafra air base, the port of Jebel Ali and smaller naval bases in Fujairah on the Gulf of Oman. Some 3,500 men are at Al Dhafra alone, where the US Air Force has deployed combat and surveillance drones and reconnaissance aircraft as well as F-15s, F-22s and (since April 2019) F-35s.<sup>44</sup> In parallel, the Emirates have also been working on their own military capabilities and have purchased weapon systems from the US on a large scale. Their air force and missile defence are at the centre of the procurement activities. Since 2000 alone, the UAE has purchased 110 F-16s.<sup>45</sup> In spring 2017, it also announced an interest in purchasing the F-35 fighter, but negotiations with the USA do not appear to have been concluded yet.<sup>46</sup> The Patriot missile defence

system and the more modern THAAD system were deployed in the UAE after 2009 and from 2016, respectively.<sup>47</sup> Since 2018 there have been problems with the procurement of precision-guided munitions from the USA. The reason has been resistance in Congress, which has opposed arms supplies to Saudi Arabia and the UAE because the two allies used American materiel in the Yemen war. The murder of the Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi in late 2018 further reduced approval of supplies to the two countries, forcing the US president to use his veto to make them possible.<sup>48</sup>

Despite these difficulties, the Trump administration made efforts to support the UAE in its regional policy. Its primary goal was to forge an anti-Iranian alliance of Middle Eastern states, which would include the UAE as a key partner alongside Saudi Arabia and Egypt. This plan was in line with the agenda of the leadership in Abu Dhabi, which is likely to have had a major influence on its development, according to press reports about the proximity between the Ambassador of the Emirates Otaiba and Trump's Middle East advisor Kushner. The UAE is also important to the current US administration because it has the least problems with Jared Kushner's plans for peace between Palestinians and Israelis. Bin Zayed would probably also accept a solution that is largely in line with the Israeli government's ideas.

world/middleeast/saudi-mbs-jared-kushner.html (accessed 20 January 2020).

<sup>43</sup> Jodi Kantor, "For Kushner, Israel Policy May Be Shaped by the Personal", *The New York Times*, 11 February 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/02/11/us/politics/jared-kushner-israel.html> (accessed 20 January 2020).

<sup>44</sup> Katzman, *The United Arab Emirates* (see note 30), 18–19.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 20.

<sup>46</sup> Carmelo Cruz, "UAE to Trump: Sell Us Some F-35 Fighter Jets", *International Policy Digest*, 11 July 2018, <https://intpolicydigest.org/2018/07/11/uae-to-trump-sell-us-some-f-35-fighter-jets/> (accessed 20 January 2020).

[intpolicydigest.org/2018/07/11/uae-to-trump-sell-us-some-f-35-fighter-jets/](https://intpolicydigest.org/2018/07/11/uae-to-trump-sell-us-some-f-35-fighter-jets/) (accessed 20 January 2020).

<sup>47</sup> "UAE Seals Deal for Patriot Missiles", *The National*, 25 December 2008, <https://www.thenational.ae/uae/uae-seals-deal-for-patriot-missiles-1.516237>; Missile Defense Project, "Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD)", *Missile Threat* (Center for Strategic and International Studies), 15 June 2018, <https://missilethreat.csis.org/system/thaad/> (both accessed 20 January 2020).

<sup>48</sup> Catie Edmondson, "House Votes to Block Arms Sales to Gulf Nations, Setting up Trump's Third Veto", *The New York Times*, 17 July 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/07/17/us/politics/saudi-arms-vote.html> (accessed 20 January 2020).

## The UAE and Saudi Arabia

Saudi Arabia is the UAE's most important ally aside from the USA. Both states have been US allies for decades. Their political systems are monarchical, they are funded by oil exports, and they fear the expansionist urges of powerful neighbours, above all Iran. For a long time, however, the Emirates' leadership was concerned that Saudi Arabia could use its unequal size (the kingdom has more than 30 million inhabitants, higher oil reserves and larger armed forces) to rise to a position of hegemony in the Gulf. As a result, between 1971 and the 1990s, the UAE acted as a junior partner to Saudi Arabia, seeking proximity to its more powerful neighbour, but always remaining suspicious.

The loss of the three islands in 1971, the year it was founded, had shown the young state its vulnerability. The outbreak of the Iran-Iraq war in 1980 put the leadership in Abu Dhabi under even greater pressure. The Gulf States took the opportunity to form an alliance excluding the regional great powers. In May 1981 Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the UAE founded the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). Its military instrument was supposed to be a joint unit called the Peninsula Shield Force, but it never developed into a significant military force. Just how weak the Gulf States were despite their alliance was shown by the Kuwait War, during which Iraq occupied GCC member state Kuwait without the Council offering any resistance. As a result, the UAE henceforth relied entirely on protection by the USA, which alone was able and willing to defend the small rich state against potentially aggressive neighbours.

### **With the UAE's increasing military strength and growing financial power, Abu Dhabi gained political weight in relation to Riyadh.**

Nevertheless, relations between Riyadh and Abu Dhabi became even closer when both rejected the 2003 Iraq war because they believed it threatened to destabilise the region and increase Iran's power. The UAE therefore supported Saudi Arabia when it began to actively oppose Iran's expansion in the Middle East from 2005 onwards.<sup>49</sup> Saudi Arabia has been the main

focus of public reporting on this rivalry, but as the UAE's military strength and financial power grew, so did Abu Dhabi's political weight. The young and dynamic leadership around Mohammed Bin Zayed was increasingly impatient with the often risk averse and hesitant old princes in Riyadh.

It was not until 2011 that Saudi Arabian politicians reacted more quickly and decisively. This was mainly due to the urgency of the problems the Kingdom faced as a result of the Arab Spring. From 2011, the Saudi and Emirati leaders pursued two common goals. First, they sought to minimise the impact of region-wide protests on the Gulf States and their allies in Egypt, Jordan and Morocco. From their perspective it became increasingly clear from 2012 onwards that the Muslim Brotherhood benefited most from the events, and that its seizure of power had to be prevented or – as in Egypt – revised. Second, Saudi Arabia and the UAE intended to stop Iran's expansion in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon and Yemen and, if possible, to reverse it. Like Abu Dhabi, Riyadh placed little hope in the Obama administration for these efforts; both states therefore took action themselves.<sup>50</sup> There was only a difference in their priorities: for the UAE, the fight against the Muslim Brotherhood and other Islamists was unmistakably more important than for Saudi Arabia, which concentrated on the conflict with Iran.

### **From 2011 to 2019, Saudi Arabia and the UAE mostly pursued regional policies together, relying increasingly on military means.**

The result of this congruence of interests was that, from 2011 to 2019, Saudi Arabia and the UAE mostly pursued regional policy together and increasingly relied on military means. This was the case in Bahrain in 2011, after the ruler of the island kingdom, Hamad Bin Isa al-Khalifa, asked the Gulf Cooperation Council for help against the Shiite protest movement threatening his rule. But its most important intervention was supporting the military coup in Egypt against President Mohammed Morsi and the Muslim Brotherhood in July 2013.

Studie 35/2008 (Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, December 2008), 17–19, [https://www.swp-berlin.org/fileadmin/contents/products/studien/2008\\_S35\\_sbg\\_ks.pdf](https://www.swp-berlin.org/fileadmin/contents/products/studien/2008_S35_sbg_ks.pdf) (accessed 20 January 2020).

<sup>49</sup> For a detailed discussion of this policy, see Guido Steinberg, *Saudi-Arabien als Partner deutscher Nahostpolitik*, SWP-

<sup>50</sup> Kristian Coates Ulrichsen, "Fire and Fury in the Gulf", *IndraStra Global* 4, no. 2 (2018): 1–8 (2).

After King Salman's accession to the throne in January 2015, the rapprochement between Riyadh and Abu Dhabi continued. The new Saudi ruler immediately made his son Mohammed Bin Salman the focus of public attention, appointing him minister of defence that month, and in April 2015 declaring him number two in the succession to the throne.<sup>51</sup> He thus cleared the way for increased centralisation and a correspondingly more decisive policy. The relationship between Mohammed Bin Zayed and the then largely unknown Mohammed Bin Salman was excellent. The two seem to have known each other for a long time, because soon after Bin Salman's appointment, Bin Zayed was described as his "mentor", having a great influence on the then only 29-year-old Saudi.<sup>52</sup> According to press reports, the Emirati leadership and its ambassador Yusef Al Otaiba lobbied hard for the young Saudi in Washington.<sup>53</sup> It is unclear whether and to what extent these activities influenced the course of events in Riyadh, but shortly after the enthronement of his father, Mohammed Bin Salman proved to be the new strong man in Riyadh. As defence minister, he started the war in Yemen in March 2015, together with the UAE leadership. In "Vision 2030", presented in June 2016, he developed an ambitious reform programme for the Saudi Arabian economy, which is primarily intended to end his country's dependence on oil. Social changes, such as the licensing of cinemas and the extension of the right to drive a car to women, completed the picture of the energetic moderniser.<sup>54</sup>

The social and economic reforms initiated by Mohammed Bin Salman were accompanied by the ruthless elimination of his competitors. In June 2017,

he forced his cousin Mohammed Bin Nayif to renounce the title of crown prince and the office of interior minister. Bin Salman became crown prince himself and continued his path to power in November 2017, when he had his last potential rival, Mit'ab Bin Abdullah, the son of the late King Abdullah and commander of the powerful National Guard, detained. Since then, Mohammed Bin Salman has been in control of all the armed forces in Saudi Arabia and is in charge of all day-to-day political affairs, indicating that he will become king after his father's death. It is therefore unlikely to have been a coincidence that Saudi Arabia and the UAE intensified their co-operation in late 2017. A particularly visible expression of this trend was the establishment in December 2017 of a committee for the enhancement of security co-operation outside the GCC — which had been set up for this very purpose in 1981.<sup>55</sup>

The UAE served Bin Salman as a model for his domestic political reforms. This was evident not only in the centralisation of political power in one person, which was very similar to developments in Abu Dhabi and the Emirates; the Emirati influence can also be seen in the overall reform programme that he launched in Saudi Arabia in 2015. His economic reforms were aimed, among other things, at building a strong sovereign wealth fund (SWF), which is also the focus of economic policy in the UAE, the country with the largest SWF in the world. Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman wanted social changes that would return Saudi Arabia to the period before 1979, when the kingdom was more liberal than in the following decades.<sup>56</sup> At the same time, Saudi Arabia under Mohammed Bin Salman acts much more uninhibitedly authoritarian than before. Here, too, the rulers in Riyadh follow the example of Mohammed Bin Zayed's UAE, in ruthlessly suppressing the Islamist and liberal opposition in the country.

51 Hugh Naylor and Liz Sly, "In a Surprise Move, Saudi Arabia's Monarch Shakes up Line of Succession", *The Washington Post*, 29 April 2015, <https://wapo.st/2urQGOT> (accessed 20 January 2020).

52 David Ignatius, "A 30-year-old Saudi Prince Could Jumpstart the Kingdom — or Drive It off a Cliff", *The Washington Post*, 28 June 2016, <https://wapo.st/39p0h7F> (accessed 20 January 2020).

53 David D. Kirkpatrick, "The Most Powerful Arab Ruler Isn't M.B.S. It's M.B.Z.", *The New York Times*, 2 June 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/06/02/world/middleeast/crown-prince-mohammed-bin-zayed.html> (accessed 20 January 2020).

54 Pankaj Mishra, "The Enduring Fantasy of the Modernizing Autocrat", *The New York Times*, 25 October 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/10/25/opinion/autocrats-prince-mohammed-saudi-arabia.html> (accessed 20 January 2020).

55 Patrick Wintour, "UAE Announces New Saudi Alliance That Could Reshape Gulf Relations", *The Guardian*, 5 December 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/dec/05/uae-saudi-arabia-alliance-gulf-relations-gcc> (accessed 20 January 2020).

56 Norah O'Donnell, "Saudi Arabia's Heir to the Throne Talks to 60 Minutes", *CBS News*, 19 March 2018, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/saudi-crown-prince-talks-to-60-minutes/> (accessed 20 January 2020).

# UAE Regional Policy

The new regional policy that the UAE has been pursuing since 2011 has two key elements. First, the Emirates, together with Saudi Arabia yet in its shadow, have established themselves as leaders of the counterrevolution. They were concerned that the protests and unrest of the Arab Spring would spread further, and supported those political and military forces that promised to limit the consequences of the upheavals and at the same time were pro-Western. In practice, this meant above all that Abu Dhabi took stronger action against Muslim Brotherhood Islamists, who could be considered the big winners of the upheavals as of 2012. Egypt and Libya became the most important projects for this Emirati policy.

Second, the leadership in Abu Dhabi turned against Iranian expansion, which was being fuelled by growing instability in the Middle East and which it perceived as a threat. In Syria, the UAE participated in supporting the insurgents only as a junior partner of the Saudis — and failed along with its allies when Russia intervened to back the Assad regime in the summer of 2015.<sup>57</sup> From March 2015 until spring 2019, the Emirates instead focused on the war in Yemen, where they tried to crush the Iranian-backed Houthi rebels alongside Saudi Arabia.

The two core elements of the Emirates' regional policy — the fight against Islamists and the containment of Iran — are linked in the conflict between the UAE and Qatar. Qatar became the most important promoter of the Muslim Brotherhood in the Arab world from 2011 and maintained close relations with Iran. Since 2014, the UAE, together with Saudi Arabia, has been trying to force the neighbouring emirate to change its policy. This was the reason for the Emirati (and Saudi) decision to impose a land, sea and air blockade on Qatar, a policy that bears witness to the Emirates' claim to hegemony on the Arabian Peninsula in conjunction with Saudi Arabia.

57 The UAE's role in Syria was so marginal that this study does not devote a chapter to aid for the insurgency.

## Leading the Counterrevolution

### Egypt

The unexpected fall of Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak on 11 February 2011 was a severe shock for the UAE leadership. The Gulf States had always considered the dictator an important ally who, like them, was pro-Western in foreign policy and authoritarian in domestic policy. To maintain continuity as much as possible, the UAE and Saudi Arabia subsequently supported the Egyptian military leadership, which had remained unaffected by the political turmoil and tried to keep the transition from the Mubarak system to new structures under control via the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (al-Majlis al-A'la li-l-Quwwat al-Musallaha). The UAE promised Egypt \$3.3 billion in aid in spring 2011, although it is unclear how much was actually paid.<sup>58</sup> Saudi Arabia also promised support at this stage, but Cairo's relations with Riyadh and Abu Dhabi deteriorated when the Muslim Brotherhood won the 2011–2012 parliamentary elections held in three rounds, and its candidate Mohammed Morsi subsequently won the June 2012 presidential elections. It is likely that the UAE had provided support to the defeated candidate, Ahmed Shafiq, a representative of the *ancien régime*. One indication is that Shafiq moved his residence to the Emirates shortly after the election.<sup>59</sup>

Morsi's election victory was also a defeat for the UAE and Saudi Arabia. In Abu Dhabi, the rise of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt was seen as a threat, since Mohammed Bin Zayed feared its influence on its Emirati branch, al-Islah, which he had repeatedly called the most dangerous opposition force in the UAE. It was therefore no coincidence that the Emirati

58 Ulrichsen, *The United Arab Emirates* (see note 4), 200.

59 Na'eem Jenaah, "The Egyptian Crisis: Two Coups Later, the Military Is Still in Control", in *Promoting Progressive African Thought Leadership*, ed. Aziz Pahad, Garth le Pere and Miranda Strydom (Pretoria: Africa Institute of South Africa, 2015), 41–53 (51).



leadership began to take more vigorous action against the local Muslim Brothers exactly in 2012, subsequently crushing them as completely as any ideological movement can be crushed. Egyptian migrant workers were also convicted of belonging to the Muslim Brotherhood.<sup>60</sup> Alarm in the UAE was heightened when Qatar took advantage of the poor relations between Abu Dhabi and Cairo to come to the aid of the new Egyptian government. In 2012 and 2013, the small emirate became Egypt's main foreign donor.<sup>61</sup>

**After 2013, the UAE became by far the most important foreign supporter of the al-Sisi regime.**

After the election of the Muslim Brother Morsi, the UAE and Saudi Arabia began planning a coup d'état with the Egyptian military. They not only contacted the then Minister of Defence Abd al-Fattah al-Sisi and provided the putschists with money, but also financed the protest movement against Morsi and the Muslim Brotherhood which had developed around an alliance of youth activists called Tamarrud ("revolt"). Their mass demonstrations provided the pretext for the coup.<sup>62</sup> On 3 July 2013, the military led by General al-Sisi overthrew the government and took power. Islamist protests were brutally crushed; more than a thousand demonstrators died. Tens of thousands ended up in prison, including Morsi and all the Muslim Brotherhood leaders that the new rulers were able to arrest. The movement was banned in September

2013 and declared a terrorist organisation in December of the same year.<sup>63</sup>

The UAE, Saudi Arabia and Kuwait reacted quickly by pledging \$12 billion in aid to Egypt the week after the coup, and then paid it quickly as well.<sup>64</sup> In the years that followed, the UAE became by far the most important foreign supporter of the al-Sisi regime. They invested in the Egyptian economy and helped fight Islamist terrorists in the Sinai. Abu Dhabi paid more than \$20 billion between 2013 and 2019, providing the lion's share of the financial aid that flowed into Egypt from the Gulf.<sup>65</sup> Over time, however, Abu Dhabi reduced its direct contributions. One reason could have been the end of the high-price phase for oil, which lasted from 2002 to summer 2014.<sup>66</sup> However, growing doubts about whether Cairo would ever tackle the urgently needed economic reforms that were repeatedly called for by the UAE may have been more central to the decision.<sup>67</sup>

From 2015 onwards, the Emirates focused their economic strategy in Egypt on direct investments. Shortly after the coup d'état in 2013, they had already set up an Egypt Task Force with offices in Cairo and Abu Dhabi, which was headed by Minister of State Sultan Ahmed al-Jaber and was to steer Emirati activities in Egypt.<sup>68</sup> The most important investments an-

<sup>60</sup> Courtney Freer, "The Muslim Brotherhood in the Emirates: Anatomy of a Crackdown", *Middle East Eye*, 17 December 2015, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/big-story/muslim-brotherhood-emirates-anatomy-crackdown> (accessed 20 January 2020).

<sup>61</sup> Imad K. Harb, "An Economic Explanation for Egypt's Alignment in the GCC Crisis" (Washington, D.C.: Arab Center Washington DC, 9 August 2017), [http://arabcenterdc.org/policy\\_analyses/an-economic-explanation-for-egypts-alignment-in-the-gcc-crisis/](http://arabcenterdc.org/policy_analyses/an-economic-explanation-for-egypts-alignment-in-the-gcc-crisis/) (accessed 20 January 2020).

<sup>62</sup> Audio recordings of conversations between leading military figures, leaked in February 2015, support this thesis. See David D. Kirkpatrick, "Recordings Suggest Emirates and Egyptian Military Pushed Ousting of Morsi", *The New York Times*, 1 March 2015, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/03/02/world/middleeast/recordings-suggest-emirates-and-egyptian-military-pushed-ousting-of-morsi.html> (accessed 20 January 2020); see also Filkins: "A Saudi Prince's Quest" (see note 38).

<sup>63</sup> "Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood Declared 'Terrorist Group'", *BBC News*, 25 December 2013, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-25515932> (accessed 20 January 2020).

<sup>64</sup> The UAE paid \$3 bn, Saudi Arabia \$5 bn and Kuwait \$4 bn, Robert F. Worth, "Egypt Is Arena for Influence of Arab Rivals", *The New York Times*, 10 July 2013, <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/07/10/world/middleeast/aid-to-egypt-from-saudis-and-emiratis-is-part-of-struggle-with-qatar-for-influence.html>; Michael Peel, Camilla Hall and Heba Saleh, "Saudi Arabia and UAE Prop up Egypt Regime with Offer of \$8 bn", *Financial Times*, 10 July 2013, <https://www.ft.com/content/7e066bdc-e8a2-11e2-8e9e-00144feabdc0> (accessed 20 January 2020).

<sup>65</sup> Katzman, *The United Arab Emirates* (see note 30), 12.

<sup>66</sup> Only in 2009 did the oil price fall below \$50 per barrel once, for half a year.

<sup>67</sup> Matthias Sailer, *Veränderte Prioritäten am Golf. Saudi-Arabien und die Emirate überdenken ihre Beziehungen zu Ägypten*, SWP-Aktuell 1/2016 (Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, January 2016), 7, <https://www.swp-berlin.org/publikation/veraenderte-prioritaeten-am-golf/> (accessed 20 January 2020).

<sup>68</sup> H. A. Hellyer, "UAE Likely to Support Egypt for Long Haul", *Al-Monitor*, 16 July 2014, <https://www.al-monitor.com/>

nounced in 2014 and 2015 concerned the construction sector. However, a gigantic housing construction project was soon scaled down considerably and the Emirates' involvement in the construction of the new capital was abandoned for economic reasons. There were nevertheless numerous smaller joint projects.

Security cooperation between the UAE and Egypt was more successful – security apparently being the top cooperation priority for the Gulf State. With over 100 million inhabitants, Egypt is the most populous Arab country, and its 440,000 troops are at least theoretically in a position to compensate for the lack of personnel in the Emirati armed forces.<sup>69</sup> The fact that the UAE was primarily interested in military cooperation was demonstrated by talks in 2014, in which Saudi Arabia and Kuwait were involved as well as the Emirates and Egypt. The talks focused on the formation of a military pact between the four states and the establishment of a joint rapid reaction force. Although the negotiations took place with the Obama administration's knowledge, they also reflected a growing distrust of Washington. According to the Gulf States and Egypt, the fight of the international alliance against IS in Iraq and Syria was too focused on a single terrorist group. Their own alliance was supposed to complement the anti-IS coalition and target a broader spectrum of Islamist groups.<sup>70</sup> The list of terrorist groups presented by the UAE, which was published at the same time as the press reports on the talks, made it clear which organisations were involved: in addition to the IS and al-Qaida, it lists the Muslim Brotherhood and numerous groups belonging to it. The Houthis in Yemen, Shiite militias in Iraq, and militant Shiite groups in the Gulf region are also mentioned.<sup>71</sup>

Parallel to these talks, the UAE supported the Cairo leadership in the fight against IS, which had begun to operate in Egypt in 2014. Mohammed Bin Zayed sent

Emirati special forces to train and support Egyptian troops. According to press reports, the UAE military is also said to have participated directly in operations against the terrorists.<sup>72</sup> In Libya, too, the Egyptian and Emirati military worked closely together from 2014. Together they supported General Haftar in his fight for control of the country. However, the limits of their cooperation became apparent in Yemen when, in spring 2015, the Egyptian leadership refused to comply with a Saudi Arabian request to send troops to fight the Houthi rebels. As a result, Saudi Arabia and the UAE stood alone alongside their Yemeni allies.

However, the project of a military alliance including Egypt continued. The joint committee of the Gulf states, founded outside the GCC at the end of 2017, was a step in this direction. By spring 2017, the UAE and Saudi Arabia had already succeeded in persuading the Trump administration to join forces on a larger scale. The USA was primarily interested in forging a regional alliance of pro-Western states against Iran. Egypt was to be an important pillar of the project, which was named the Middle East Strategic Alliance (MESA). A formal pact was not concluded, but until spring 2019 the informal alliance included Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain, Kuwait and Jordan, in addition to Egypt. These states' armed forces even undertook joint manoeuvres in Egypt in November 2018.<sup>73</sup> But in April 2019 Cairo withdrew from the project, which was informally dubbed "the Arab NATO". The al-Sisi government is said to have feared, inter alia, that the tensions with Tehran could lead to a direct confrontation.<sup>74</sup> Indeed, it remains rather sceptical about the US's anti-Iran policy, because containing Iran is not nearly as important to Egypt as it is for its partners. The withdrawal also showed that Cairo, despite generous support, is not prepared to follow UAE/Saudi Arabian leadership. Although the UAE had a strong ally in Egypt, the latter repeatedly

pulse/fr/originals/2014/07/egypt-uae-sisi-gulf-aid-muslim-brotherhood.html (accessed 20 January 2020).

<sup>69</sup> On troop numbers, see International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS), "Chapter Seven: Middle East and North Africa", *The Military Balance 2018*, 329. Egypt has 397,000 paramilitaries in addition to its army.

<sup>70</sup> Hamza Hendawi, "Egypt, Gulf Arab Allies Eye Anti-militant Alliance", *Associated Press*, 4 November 2014.

<sup>71</sup> "List of Groups Designated Terrorist Organisations by the UAE", *The National*, 16 November 2014, <https://www.thenational.ae/uae/government/list-of-groups-designated-terrorist-organisations-by-the-uae-1.270037> (accessed 20 January 2020).

<sup>72</sup> Adam Entous, "The Enemy of My Enemy", *The New Yorker*, 18 June 2018.

<sup>73</sup> "Egypt Hosts Arab Military Exercises in What Could Develop into an 'Arab NATO'", *Reuters*, 31 October 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-egypt-military-arabs/egypt-hosts-arab-military-exercises-in-what-could-develop-into-an-arab-nato-idUSKCN1N52HS> (accessed 20 January 2020).

<sup>74</sup> Joyce Karam, "With Egypt's Withdrawal, Hopes for MESA Alliance Are Diminished But Not Dead", *The National*, 15 April 2019, <https://www.thenational.ae/world/mena/with-egypt-s-withdrawal-hopes-for-mesa-alliance-are-diminished-but-not-dead-1.849401> (accessed 20 January 2020).

demonstrated that it considers itself to be the much more important regional power. Only as long as their interests coincided completely did the Egyptians co-operate closely with the Emiratis. This is especially true with regard to Libya.

## Libya

At the start of the UAE intervention in Libya in 2011, its anti-Islamist thrust was only vaguely discernible. Among the motives for intervening in the civil-war-torn North African country, the most prevalent may initially have been the desire to prove itself a valuable ally vis-à-vis the US and NATO. From 2012 and especially 2014, however, the UAE's goal became increasingly clear: Abu Dhabi wanted to prevent Islamists from taking power in Tripoli and favoured an authoritarian autocracy instead. The UAE found its partner in General Khalifa Haftar, who from 2014 onwards tried to extend his control from Eastern Libya to the entire country.

The (first) Libyan civil war broke out in February 2011, after security forces of Muammar al-Gaddafi's regime unsuccessfully attempted to break up a series of protest rallies with armed force. On 17 March 2011, as Gaddafi's troops marched towards the rebel stronghold of Benghazi, the UN Security Council adopted Resolution 1973, allowing an intervention to protect the civilian population. In the preceding days, the UAE and Qatar had been instrumental in organising the Gulf Cooperation Council and the Arab League to demand the establishment of a no-fly zone for the Libyan military. The diplomatic activities of the two Gulf States made it easier for the USA and its allies to counter the impression that the subsequent intervention was a war waged by the West against an Arab country.<sup>75</sup>

The UAE and Qatar also took part in the subsequent fighting against Gaddafi's troops. The UAE sent twelve fighter planes; Qatar sent six. Both states also supported certain insurgents with money and weapons. The UAE quickly found its preferred ally in the Zintan militias. The city southwest of Tripoli, with a population of about 50–60,000, quickly gained in importance because units commanded by its military

council became the second strongest militia alliance in the country with this Emirati support. The Zintan Brigades belong to the nationalist spectrum of Libyan politics, and had opposed the powerful Islamist groups from an early stage.<sup>76</sup> The Islamists' mightiest force was the militia alliance of Misrata, a port city east of Tripoli, which received support from Qatar from 2011 onwards.<sup>77</sup> In the years that followed, the conflict between the armed groups increasingly took on the character of a proxy war of the UAE against Qatar.

The militias from Zintan were not very powerful in numbers, with just several thousand fighters. But they benefited from the experience of former officers of the Gaddafi regime, who, together with Emirati trainers, ensured that the Zintan militias became known for their good organisation and their fighting strength, which was high by Libyan standards. The competition with the Islamist organisations became more apparent from August 2011 onwards, when an alliance of revolutionary groups with different ideological orientations took over the capital Tripoli and did not desist from violence within the metropolis even after the end of the civil war in October 2011. Thereafter the Zintan militias controlled, among other things, the international airport south of Tripoli.<sup>78</sup> The weak transitional governments of the years 2011–2014 failed to bring the victorious militias under their control, with the result that conflicts between nationalists and Islamists over who ruled in the capital city intensified. In the summer of 2014, these clashes led to a second civil war, when fighting broke out in Tripoli between enemy militias, from which an alliance led by armed groups from Misrata, called Dawn of Libya (Fajr Libiya), emerged victorious. In August, Dawn militias took the capital's international airport, driving out the UAE proxy troops.<sup>79</sup>

<sup>76</sup> Dario Cristiani, *The Zintan Militia and the Fragmented Libyan State*, Hot Issues (Washington, D.C.: The Jamestown Foundation, 19 January 2012), [https://jamestown.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/01/Zintan\\_Brigade\\_Grey.pdf?x10484](https://jamestown.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/01/Zintan_Brigade_Grey.pdf?x10484) (accessed 20 January 2020).

<sup>77</sup> Wolfram Lacher, *Fault Lines of the Revolution. Political Actors, Camps and Conflicts in the New Libya*, SWP Research Paper 4/2013 (Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, May 2013), 19, <https://www.swp-berlin.org/en/publication/libya-fault-lines-of-the-revolution/> (accessed 20 January 2020).

<sup>78</sup> Frederic Wehrey, *The Burning Shores: Inside the Battle for the New Libya* (New York, 2018), 93–94.

<sup>79</sup> Chris Stephen and Anne Penketh, "Libyan Capital under Islamist Control after Tripoli Airport Seized", *The Guardian*, 24 August 2014, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/>

<sup>75</sup> Jean-Marc Rickli, "The Political Rationale and Implications of the United Arab Emirates' Military Involvement in Libya", in *Political Rationale and International Consequences of the War in Libya*, ed. Dag Henriksen and Ann Karin Larssen (Oxford, 2016), 134–54 (142).



The year 2014 was a turning point in Libya and in the UAE's policy towards the country. Abu Dhabi was now looking for a new partner. One important motivation was the rise of Islamist militias, which were gaining ground not only in the capital Tripoli. In the east of the country, too, Islamist groups of various orientations had been growing stronger and stronger since 2012. They were able to expand their influence in Benghazi and brought large parts of the city under their control. In July 2014, there were the first public indications of an IS presence in the Eastern Libyan Jihadist stronghold of Derna.<sup>80</sup> An important trigger for the UAE's now more active policy was an incident in the same month, in which 21 Egyptian border guards were killed near the Libyan border during an attack by an armed group. Egypt blamed "terrorists" for the attack, and Cairo began debating military intervention in the neighbouring country. The UAE leadership also feared that the civil war in Libya might affect Egypt's stability. As early as August, Emirati fighter planes flew two waves of attacks against Misrata militias in Tripoli from a base in Egypt, but were unable to prevent the Dawn coalition from taking over the capital.<sup>81</sup>

### **As of 2014, the UAE became Haftar's most important aide in terms of money and arms supplies.**

At this point in the summer of 2014, if not earlier, the UAE decided to support the Libyan warlord Khalifa Haftar. Haftar is a former army officer and associate of Gaddafi's, who broke with the dictator in the late 1980s. He had already tried to gain a political-military foothold in Libya in 2011. In February 2014 Haftar reappeared and began to build a military force. He merged Eastern Libyan tribal groups and former units of the Gaddafi regime into the Libyan National

Army (LNA). Haftar rallied his troops under the banner of an uncompromising fight against Islamists and terrorists, and promoted himself as Libya's new strong man. In May 2014 he launched an offensive under the name Operation Dignity (Karama). The start of this campaign prompted Haftar's opponents to found the aforementioned Dawn coalition, which claimed to defend the Libyan revolution against a counter-revolution by the old regime (namely Haftar) based on the Egyptian model, and was supported by Qatar and Turkey. Haftar was unable to penetrate the west of the country with the LNA and prevent the Dawn militias from taking over the capital. Instead, from 2015, he concentrated on conquering Benghazi and creating a power base in the Cyrenaica region. The commander received support from Egypt, the UAE and – less openly – Saudi Arabia from summer 2014, if not before.<sup>82</sup>

From 2014, the UAE became Haftar's most significant supporter, whose troops replaced the Zintan militias as the most important recipients of financial and arms supplies from the Emirates. In June 2016, they established an air base in Haftar-controlled territory in the east of the country and supported the LNA's advance from the air.<sup>83</sup> Emirati special forces are also said to have intervened in the fighting on Haftar's side.<sup>84</sup> However, they mainly equipped the warlord with weapons, including modern ones such as attack helicopters, armoured vehicles, combat drones and anti-aircraft missiles – an approach that is questionable under international law, since a UN arms embargo has been in force for Libya since February 2011 (which the UAE has ignored from the outset).

On the ground, General Haftar had great difficulty in achieving his military objectives. It soon became apparent that his Libyan National Army was more of a militia alliance with limited clout. It therefore took until February 2016 for Haftar's units to report their first successes against the powerful Islamists in Benghazi. They did not finally defeat their opponents in the city until November 2017, owing in part to Emirati air support. Another reason why Haftar's

aug/24/libya-capital-under-islamist-control-tripoli-airport-seized-operation-dawn (accessed 20 January 2020).

<sup>80</sup> For a detailed discussion of IS in Libya, see Guido Steinberg, *Das Ende des IS. Die Fragmentierung der jihadistischen Bewegung*, SWP-Studie 20/2018 (Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, September 2018), 17–21, [https://www.swp-berlin.org/fileadmin/contents/products/studien/2018S20\\_sbg.pdf](https://www.swp-berlin.org/fileadmin/contents/products/studien/2018S20_sbg.pdf) (accessed 20 January 2020).

<sup>81</sup> David D. Kirkpatrick and Eric Schmitt, "Arab Nations Strike in Libya, Surprising U.S.," *The New York Times*, 25 August 2014, <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/08/26/world/africa/egypt-and-united-arab-emirates-said-to-have-secretly-carried-out-libya-airstrikes.html> (accessed 20 January 2020).

<sup>82</sup> It is not clear whether Haftar enjoyed the support of the UAE and Egypt even before his public appearance in February 2014. However, the Emiratis' approach in other cases suggests that Haftar was deliberately selected and built up.

<sup>83</sup> "UN Team: UAE Is Developing Its Air Base in Eastern Libya", *Middle East Monitor*, 2 March 2018, <http://bit.ly/38jqrZI> (accessed 20 January 2020).

<sup>84</sup> Kirkpatrick and Schmitt, "Arab Nations Strike in Libya" (see note 81)

fighters were finally able to prevail was that Jihadists loyal to IS had withdrawn from Benghazi and other places in the east to the city of Sirte, further west, in 2015. There they took control from the summer of 2015 and established state-like structures based on the Iraqi and Syrian model. It was not Haftar's troops, however, but militias from Misrata that drove the jihadists out of Sirte in December 2016 with US support.<sup>85</sup>

Despite these difficulties, the UAE appears to have increased its arms supplies to Haftar since 2017. A factor was probably that the Trump administration was less critical of Abu Dhabi's actions in Libya than its predecessor. The Obama administration saw Haftar, and Emirati and Egyptian support for him, as an obstacle to a political solution to the conflict in Libya. On several occasions, it also criticised Abu Dhabi's routine circumvention of the UN arms embargo, sometimes in harsh terms.<sup>86</sup> In contrast, the Trump government showed no interest in the North African country. Officially, however, it supported (like its predecessor) the unity government under Prime Minister Fayeze al-Sarraj, which was recognised by the UN in March 2016. It was therefore all the more surprising that in April 2019 President Trump broke with existing US policy towards Libya and had a statement published announcing that the White House backed Haftar's offensive on Tripoli, which had just begun. According to press reports, Trump was persuaded to take this step by Mohammed Bin Zayed in a telephone conversation.<sup>87</sup>

Khalifa Haftar had already used US indifference, and the increased aid from Egypt and the UAE from 2017 onwards, to take the cities of Sabha and Ubari in southern and south-western Libya in January and February 2019.<sup>88</sup> After this, the advance on Tripoli,

which began in April 2019, was only logical. Haftar seems to have gambled on the disunity of the militias in the capital, but they overcame their rivalries to fend off the attack. They even succeeded in going on the counter-offensive and pushing back the "National Army", resulting in a temporary military stalemate. It was not until autumn 2019 that Haftar's troops made progress again, after Russia had extended its support and sent mercenaries. After Turkey intervened on the side of the unity government in early 2020, Haftar's forces were pushed back, resulting in an uneasy stalemate yet again.

## Containing Iran in Yemen

The second important goal of the new Emirati regional policy was to halt Iranian expansion, which had accelerated from 2011 onwards against the backdrop of increasing instability in the region. Its significance was first demonstrated by the UAE during the protests in Bahrain in March 2011, when it intervened in favour of the Sunni ruling family against the Shi'ite insurgency. Yet in Syria the Emirates supported rebel groups against the Assad regime because it is allied with Iran. By far the most important arena of the conflict with Iran, however, was Yemen, where Saudi Arabia and the UAE jointly intervened from March 2015 against the Iranian-backed Houthi rebels. Nevertheless, for the Emirates the goal of pushing Iran back was always secondary to fighting (Sunni) Islamists in the Arab world. The Yemen war thus repeatedly highlighted differences of opinion between Riyadh and Abu Dhabi, and the UAE finally left the alliance in July 2019, and withdrew its contingent.

### Riyadh and Abu Dhabi feared that the Houthi rebels would establish a "Yemeni Hezbollah".

The rise of the Houthi rebels was the reason for the Emirati and Saudi military intervention in Yemen. In September 2014, Shi'ite militiamen had seized the Yemeni capital Sana'a and driven out the government of President Abdrabbuh Mansur Hadi. Subsequently, the insurgents even advanced far into the south of the country and, in March, conquered the port city of Aden. One reason for their astonishing successes was

<sup>85</sup> Steinberg, *Das Ende des IS* (see note 80), 17–19.

<sup>86</sup> Kareem Fahim and Missy Ryan, "In the UAE, U.S. Finds an Ally and a Headache", *The Washington Post*, 4 August 2017. MBZ reportedly reacted "angrily" to the US government's criticism, Declan Walsh, Eric Schmitt and John Ismay, "American Missiles Found in Libyan Rebel Compound", *The New York Times*, 28 June 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/06/28/world/africa/libya-american-missiles.html> (accessed 20 January 2020).

<sup>87</sup> Kirkpatrick, "The Most Powerful Arab Ruler" (see note 53).

<sup>88</sup> Wolfram Lacher, *Libya's Conflicts Enter a Dangerous New Phase*, SWP Comment 8/2019 (Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, February 2019), 1f., <http://www.swp-berlin.org/>

[fileadmin/contents/products/comments/2019C08\\_lac.pdf](fileadmin/contents/products/comments/2019C08_lac.pdf) (accessed 20 January 2020).

that before the march on Aden, they had allied themselves with former President Ali Abdullah Saleh and the army units that were still controlled by him. The initial aim of the Saudi-Emirati coalition was to help Hadi regain power throughout the country and smash the Houthi-Saleh alliance. Riyadh and Abu Dhabi feared that the rebels would set up a “Yemeni Hezbollah”, which, like the Lebanese organisation of that name, would threaten neighbouring countries. Since Tehran supplied money and weapons, and since Iranian Revolutionary Guards and Lebanese Hezbollah trained the Houthi fighters, the coalition partners accused the Houthis of taking their orders from Iran.<sup>89</sup>

At the time, this perception only partially corresponded to the reality, since the ties between the rebel group and Iran were significantly weaker in 2014 than in later years. Politically, ideologically and militarily, the Houthi militia was never as strongly oriented towards Tehran as Lebanese Hezbollah, nor did it at any time receive as much support as Shiite groups in Lebanon, Syria and Iraq. Nevertheless, the Iranians became successively more active after 2014, amid growing indications that the Houthis used Iranian materiel in their attacks on Saudi Arabian territory.<sup>90</sup> This support was already evident in 2017, when the rebels used ballistic missiles with a greater range than before, and even more so from 2018, when the Saudi Arabian military increasingly intercepted ballistic missiles which the Houthis had fired at Saudi Arabia. As a result, the Iranians began to equip their allies with combat drones and cruise missiles as well, which are much harder to intercept.

To date, it has not been conclusively elucidated who took the initiative for the war in Yemen in 2015. According to some reports, it was the crown prince of Abu Dhabi who convinced the Saudi leadership. If so, the change of king in January proved a favourable circumstance for the Emirates, since the new Defence Minister Mohammed Bin Salman was a strong supporter of military intervention. Moreover, Abu Dhabi

and Riyadh benefited from US support. Although the Obama administration was critical of the Emirati and Saudi actions, it decided to help. This was a reaction to the two Arab partners’ growing dissatisfaction with US regional policy and especially with the nuclear agreement with Iran, which was almost ready to be signed at that time. Obama believed that he needed to accommodate his allies by supporting them in their fight against Iran’s expansion in the region. The US military thus transmitted target data and other intelligence information, helped select targets, refuelled Saudi Arabian aircraft in the air, and supplied ammunition and spare parts.<sup>91</sup> Without this support, the Saudi Air Force would not have been able to conduct the war in Yemen for more than five years; the UAE military was also heavily dependent on American support. However, even in the first years of the war, criticism in Congress, which was provoked by the large numbers of civilian casualties during the air attacks and by the lengthy fighting, became increasingly vocal. In December 2016, the Obama administration reacted by stopping the sale of guided munitions kits to the Saudi military.<sup>92</sup> However, under Obama there was no change to the principle of support.

The US government’s restrictive measures mainly affected the Saudis, because of the division of labour that had developed between the Saudi and Emirati forces during the first months of the war. The Saudis concentrated on the north and fought the Houthis primarily from the air; the UAE troops, on the other hand, concentrated on South Yemen, where they took the port city of Aden in July 2015.<sup>93</sup> However, from the first few months onwards, the coalition’s biggest problem proved to be the lack of ground troops. Riyadh and Abu Dhabi seem to have hoped to persuade Egypt or Pakistan to send suitable units, but Cairo only participated in the sea blockade, while Pakistan showed no interest at all. Saudi Arabia and the UAE then tried to recruit mercenaries. In fact, Sudan and Senegal pro-

<sup>89</sup> An example of this argument can be found in Abdulkhaleq Abdullah, “Why the UAE Is Fighting in Yemen”, *Gulf News*, 12 October 2015, <https://gulfnews.com/opinion/op-eds/why-the-uae-is-fighting-in-yemen-1.1599513> (accessed 20 January 2020).

<sup>90</sup> Guido Steinberg, *Die schiitische Internationale: Iran treue Milizen weiten den Einfluss Teherans in der arabischen Welt aus*, SWP-Aktuell 59/2018 (Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, October 2018), [https://www.swp-berlin.org/fileadmin/contents/products/aktuell/2018A59\\_sbg.pdf](https://www.swp-berlin.org/fileadmin/contents/products/aktuell/2018A59_sbg.pdf) (accessed 20 January 2020).

<sup>91</sup> Emile Hokayem and David B. Roberts, “The War in Yemen”, *Survival* 58, no. 6 (2016): 157–86 (165–68).

<sup>92</sup> Helene Cooper, “U.S. Blocks Arms Sale to Saudi Arabia Amid Concerns over Yemen War”, *The New York Times*, 13 December 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/12/13/us/politics/saudi-arabia-arms-sale-yemen-war.html> (accessed 20 January 2020).

<sup>93</sup> Michael Knights and Alexandre Mello, *The Saudi-UAE War Effort in Yemen (Part 1): Operation Golden Arrow in Aden*, Policywatch 2464 (Washington, D.C.: The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 10 August 2015), <http://bit.ly/31KLd1I> (accessed 20 January 2020).

vided regular troops and militiamen for a fee.<sup>94</sup> The UAE also sent its own mercenary force, mostly Latin American, which Abu Dhabi had been putting together for years.<sup>95</sup> To further increase the number of available soldiers, the UAE began training Yemeni units. In the course of the conflict, they formed an alliance in the south, led by Emirati special forces and including remnants of Yemeni government troops, South Yemeni separatists, local and tribal militias, and even Salafist units. The latter are regarded by Abu Dhabi as less dangerous than Islamists from Muslim Brotherhood circles because they are loyal to the existing state authorities.

By May 2017 at the latest, however, this alliance broke down due to a conflict between the Hadi government and the separatists. The conflict was a direct consequence of the divergence of interests between Riyadh and Abu Dhabi, which gained in importance in the course of the war. Saudi Arabia relied on cooperation with the al-Islah party, which represents the Muslim Brotherhood in Yemen. Al-Islah is an alliance of Islamists, tribal militias and Salafists, and was the most important opponent of the Houthis from 2011 to 2013. When Riyadh decided in 2013 to join forces with the UAE to fight the Muslim Brotherhood throughout the region, it also withdrew its support from al-Islah. This was one reason why the Houthi-Saleh alliance was able to inflict a crushing defeat on the party and allied tribes in the following year, 2014. From 2015 on, Riyadh once more worked together with the Islamists, since it saw no other way of deciding the conflict in its favour. Abu Dhabi, on the other hand, refused any cooperation with al-Islah, and UAE troops are said to have brutally persecuted Muslim Brothers in the areas that they and their allies controlled.<sup>96</sup>

<sup>94</sup> Hokayem and Roberts, "The War in Yemen" (see note 91), 171. On the Emirates' warfare using Sudanese soldiers and Yemeni militias, see Declan Walsh, "This Is the Front Line of Saudi Arabia's Invisible War", *The New York Times*, 20 October 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2018/10/20/world/middleeast/saudi-arabia-invisible-war-yemen.html> (accessed 20 January 2020).

<sup>95</sup> Emily B. Hager and Mark Mazzetti, "Emirates Secretly Sends Colombian Mercenaries to Yemen Fight", *The New York Times*, 25 November 2015, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/11/26/world/middleeast/emirates-secretly-sends-colombian-mercenaries-to-fight-in-yemen.html> (accessed 20 January 2020).

<sup>96</sup> Samuel Ramani, "The Saudi-UAE Alliance Could Be Weaker than It Appears", *The National Interest*, 11 December 2017, [https://nationalinterest.org/feature/the-saudi-uae-](https://nationalinterest.org/feature/the-saudi-uae-alliance-could-be-weaker-it-appears-23606)

In contrast to the Saudis, the Emirati troops relied on the militias they had formed in South Yemen. Their most important local ally was the Security Belt Forces (Quwwat al-Hizam al-Amni), a militia set up by the UAE in 2016 which operated mainly in Aden and the southwest.<sup>97</sup> UAE units also trained and supported two armed groups called the Hadhrami elite (an-Nukhba al-Hadhramiya) and Shabwani elite (an-Nukhba al-Shabwaniya), which were deployed in their respective home provinces of Hadhramaut and Shabwa.<sup>98</sup> The UAE thus relied on units whose commanders openly fought for an independent South Yemeni state, making conflicts between Abu Dhabi and the Saudi Arabia-backed Hadi government inevitable. The UAE eventually withdrew its initial support. Hadi and his senior followers were mostly in exile in Saudi Arabia from 2015 onwards; in February 2017, tensions erupted spectacularly when, during a visit to Abu Dhabi, Hadi reportedly accused Mohammed Bin Zayed's UAE of acting "like an occupying power" in Yemen.<sup>99</sup> The conflict escalated further when Hadi dismissed Aidarus al-Zubaidi, the UAE-loyal governor of Aden, at the end of April. In May, al-Zubaidi, together with other leading separatists, founded the Southern Transitional Council (al-Majlis al-Intiqali al-Janubi, STC), which is working towards the establishment of an independent state of South Yemen and has positioned itself as the UAE's most important client in Yemen. In January 2018, fighting broke out in Aden, during which the separatists, with the help of the Emirates, were able to prevail against Hadi loyalists and take control of the city.<sup>100</sup>

alliance-could-be-weaker-it-appears-23606 (accessed 20 January 2020).

<sup>97</sup> Ghaith Abdul-Ahad, "Yemen on the Brink: How the UAE Is Profiting from the Chaos of Civil War", *The Guardian*, 21 December 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/news/2018/dec/21/yemen-uae-united-arab-emirates-profiting-from-chaos-of-civil-war> (accessed 20 January 2020).

<sup>98</sup> Eleonora Ardemagni and Umberto Profazio, *New Armies for a New Era: Decrypting Post-2011 Arab Military Reform Trends*, Research Paper 145 (Rome: NATO Defense College, March 2018), <http://www.ndc.nato.int/download/downloads.php?icode=545> (accessed 20 January 2020).

<sup>99</sup> David Hearst, "Exclusive: Yemen President Says UAE Acting Like Occupiers", *Middle East Eye*, 12 May 2017, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/exclusive-yemeni-president-says-emiratis-acting-occupiers-1965874493> (accessed 20 January 2020).

<sup>100</sup> Osama Bin Javaid, "Yemen: Separatists Take over Government Headquarters in Aden", *Al Jazeera*, 28 January 2018,

In 2018, there were frequent reports that the UAE wanted to end the war in Yemen. Since late 2015, none of the warring parties had been able to gain any decisive advantages. The Houthi-Saleh alliance was able to hold on to the northern highlands and the capital Sanaa without any difficulty, while the Saudi-Arabian-Emirati alliance dominated the south. The Emirates' efforts to persuade Ali Abdullah Saleh to break with the Houthis also failed when the rebels assassinated the former president in December 2017 — and showed no signs of weakness in the aftermath either. In a possibly last attempt to force a decision, coalition forces led by the UAE military launched an offensive against Hodeidah on the west coast of Yemen in June 2018. The port city was significant because it was the only remaining way to supply the northern highlands, though the sea blockade made supplies completely inadequate. Riyadh and Abu Dhabi apparently hoped to force the Houthis to negotiate by conquering Hodeidah.<sup>101</sup> Although the coalition managed to penetrate the outskirts of the city, the international community's resistance to the offensive intensified over the following months. The risk seemed too great that the capture could lead to a further deterioration of the already catastrophic humanitarian situation in northern Yemen. Another reason for the growing interest that the world was taking in the conflict at the time was the murder of Saudi journalist and regime critic Jamal Khashoggi in Istanbul in October 2018. The US Congress in particular wanted to increase pressure on Saudi Arabia and the UAE after the Trump administration, immediately after taking office, resumed the delivery of precision-guided munitions kits, which had been stopped by Obama, and refused to react to the murder of Khashoggi. On 13 December 2018, the US Senate passed a resolution calling on the US to stop all military support for the war in Yemen.<sup>102</sup> This pressure from Washington was

<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/01/yemen-separatists-government-headquarters-aden-180128135207416.html> (accessed 20 January 2020).

**101** "UAE Says Pauses Hodeidah Offensive for U.N. Yemen Peace Efforts", *Reuters*, 1 July 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-yemen-security/uae-says-pauses-hodeidah-offensive-for-u-n-yemen-peace-efforts-idUSKBN1JR1CL> (accessed 20 January 2020).

**102** Julie Hirschfeld Davis and Eric Schmitt, "Senate Votes to End Aid for Yemen Fight over Khashoggi Killing and Saudis' War Aims", *The New York Times*, 13 December 2018,

probably the most important reason why Riyadh and Abu Dhabi agreed to a ceasefire for the province of Hodeidah in December 2018 during negotiations held under the auspices of the UN in Stockholm.<sup>103</sup>

However, implementing the agreement proved difficult. In Hodeidah there was virtually no more fighting, but armed conflicts broke out again in other parts of the country. Despite this, in May 2019 it seemed that progress was being made, as the Houthis announced their withdrawal from Hodeidah. In May and June, however, the rebels resumed their attacks on Saudi targets, which they had largely stopped six months earlier, with renewed intensity. As of 2018, they had increasingly used drones and cruise missiles of Iranian manufacture, a sign that Tehran had augmented its arms supplies to the Houthis both quantitatively and qualitatively. Just how threatening the new weapon systems were became apparent in June 2019, when the Houthis attacked the civilian airport of Abha in south-western Saudi Arabia with cruise missiles.<sup>104</sup> In August 2019, the UAE was forced to accept that these weapon systems also posed a threat to its territory, when rebels attacked a Saudi Arabian oil field near the Emirati border.<sup>105</sup> These events were evidence that the war, which had been intended to prevent the emergence of a "Yemeni Hezbollah", had in fact turned the Houthis into an enemy who threatened Saudi Arabia and the UAE by straightforward means.

Moreover, in the course of the conflict the Houthis became increasingly dependent on Iran, their sole supporter. An incident on 14 September 2019 made this abundantly clear. On that day, the Saudi oil facilities of Abqaiq and Khurais were attacked with drones and cruise missiles, resulting in the temporary loss of more than half of the country's daily oil pro-

<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/12/13/us/politics/yemen-saudi-war-pompeo-mattis.html> (accessed 20 January 2020).

**103** Declan Walsh, "Yemen Cease-Fire Takes Effect: Why Now and What's Next?", *The New York Times*, 18 December 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/12/18/world/middleeast/yemen-cease-fire.html?module=inline> (accessed 20 January 2020).

**104** Vivian Yee, "Houthis Strike Saudi Airport, Escalating Yemen Conflict", *The New York Times*, 12 June 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/06/12/world/middleeast/saudi-airport-attack.html> (accessed 20 January 2020).

**105** Caleb Weiss, "Houthis Claim Major Drone Operation Near the UAE", *The Long War Journal*, 17 August 2019, <https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2019/08/houthis-claim-major-drone-operation-near-the-uae.php> (accessed 20 January 2020).



duction. The Houthis claimed responsibility for the attack. However, US intelligence services concluded that the drones and cruise missiles had been fired from Iranian territory.<sup>106</sup> The fact that the Houthis helped to cover up Iran's authorship, thereby risking countermeasures not only by the Saudis and Emiratis but also by the USA, illustrates the extent to which they had become a Tehran proxy, and the extent to which they had subordinated (or been forced to subordinate) their own interests to their protector's.

By this time, the UAE had already withdrawn most of its troops from Yemen. In July 2019, they had announced that they would end the war in Yemen and recall the majority of their forces.<sup>107</sup> Therefore, ground operations against the Houthis were no longer possible. The official reason given by the Emirates was a show of support for the Stockholm negotiations. Some observers suspected that the leadership in Abu Dhabi was withdrawing its troops in the context of the escalating conflict between the USA and Iran so as to protect the Emirates themselves if necessary. Another assumption was that the Iranian attacks on ships near the Strait of Hormuz in May and June 2019 had made the Emirates aware of their own vulnerability, and that Abu Dhabi had wanted to send a signal of détente towards Tehran.

This is in line with the fact that the UAE did not publicly blame Iran for the damage to the tankers and that Emirati officials held talks with Tehran on the safety of shipping around the Strait of Hormuz.<sup>108</sup> Another reason for the withdrawal may also have been that the UAE had achieved important goals in Yemen: not only did militias allied with the Emirates dominate large parts of South Yemen; these groups had also demonstrated their strength in August when they (once again) expelled supporters of the Hadi gov-

ernment from Aden.<sup>109</sup> The UAE and/or its local allies also continued to control all major ports from the Omani border to the island of Perim at the entrance to the Red Sea, as well as the island of Socotra.

## Isolating Qatar

The UAE's policy towards the neighbouring emirate of Qatar combines the two key elements of Abu Dhabi's regional policy: fighting the Islamists and containing Iran. Since 2011 Qatar has become the most important supporter of the Muslim Brotherhood in the Arab world alongside Turkey, and despite its small size and lack of military power has tried to pursue an active regional policy. On the other hand, despite its alliance with the USA and the other Arab Gulf states, Doha has endeavoured to maintain the best possible relations with Iran. This course of action has led to a conflict between Qatar on the one hand and the UAE, Saudi Arabia and other states on the other, which escalated to a full blockade of Qatar by its neighbours in 2017.

**While Saudi Arabia disliked Qatar's friendly relations with Iran, the UAE was particularly disturbed by Doha's benevolent treatment of Islamists.**

Qatar is the smallest Gulf Cooperation Council state after Bahrain. Until the 1990s, the emirate's foreign policy was oriented towards Saudi Arabia. This changed, however, when Emir Hamad Ibn Khalifa Al Thani took office in 1995. During his reign (until 2013), he massively pushed the exploitation and export of the country's huge gas reserves. Within a few years, Qatar became the world's largest exporter of liquefied natural gas (LNG).<sup>110</sup> Qatar's natural gas comes from the largest known field on earth, a field it shares with Iran. As exploitation continues, Qatar's and Iran's production facilities will move closer to each other, making it advisable for Qatar to cooperate

<sup>106</sup> Helene Cooper and Michael Crowley, "Trump Focuses on Defending Saudis, Not Striking Iran, for Now", *The New York Times*, 20 September 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/09/20/world/middleeast/trump-iran-saudi-arabia.html> (accessed 20 January 2020).

<sup>107</sup> Declan Walsh and David D. Kirkpatrick, "U.A.E. Pulls Most Forces from Yemen in Blow to Saudi War Effort", *The New York Times*, 11 July 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/07/11/world/middleeast/yemen-emirates-saudi-war.html> (accessed 20 January 2020).

<sup>108</sup> David D. Kirkpatrick and Farnaz Fassihi, "Hard-Liners in Iran See No Drawback to Bellicose Strategy", *The New York Times*, 17 September 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/09/17/world/middleeast/iran-saudi-arabia-oil-attack.html> (accessed 20 January 2020).

<sup>109</sup> Peter Beaumont, "'Scores' Killed in Yemen as UAE-backed Fighters Seize Parts of Aden", *The Guardian*, 14 August 2019, <http://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2019/aug/14/scores-killed-in-yemen-as-uae-backed-fighters-seize-parts-of-aden> (accessed 20 January 2020).

<sup>110</sup> "Qatar Leads Global LNG Exports But Who Else Make the Top 5?", *NS Energy*, 23 August 2019, <https://www.nsenenergy.com/features/qatar-global-lng-exports-top-5/> (accessed 20 January 2020).

with Iran. For this reason, Emir Hamad Ibn Khalifa relied on US protection — since 2003, American fighter planes have been stationed at the important air base in Qatar's al-Udaid — and also maintained close relations with Tehran. From 2005 onwards, the Qatari leadership also attempted to mediate in conflicts between Iran's allies and their opponents in Lebanon, the Palestinian territories and Sudan so as to prevent escalation and establish itself as an indispensable mediator.<sup>111</sup> Doha accepted that Riyadh and Abu Dhabi, who always viewed Iran's policy in the region with suspicion, disapproved of the Qatari strategy.

While Saudi Arabia perceived Qatar's friendly relations with Iran as particularly problematic, the UAE primarily criticised Doha's benevolent treatment and promotion of Islamists. Under the ruler Hamad Ibn Khalifa, the small emirate had become an increasingly important exile for Muslim Brothers from several Arab countries. With the news channel al-Jazeera, founded in 1996, which rapidly developed into the most popular medium in the Arab world, Islamists also gained a public forum. Again and again, the governments of the region, who were not used to public criticism, protested against the broadcasts from Doha. Until 2011, these neighbours regarded such activities as a nuisance more than a real problem. However, with the start of the Arab Spring, the UAE increasingly perceived Qatar's policies as threatening. One reason was its mistrust of the Muslim Brotherhood at home. From the Emirates' perspective, by promoting the Muslim Brotherhood, Doha supported a movement which threatened the stability of the Federation. Moreover, from the second half of 2011, Qatar identified Islamists as the political force of the future in many countries of the Arab world and began to support the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, the al-Nahda party in Tunisia, al-Islah in Yemen, and Islamist insurgents in Syria. This new focus for Qatari politics was also reflected in al-Jazeera news coverage, which increasingly sided with the Islamists in the region. While this already caused great discontent amongst all neighbours, it was Qatari policy towards Egypt in particular that convinced Abu Dhabi to take action against the small emirate. In Egypt, Doha supported the government of President Mohammed Morsi with

billions in aid until 2013.<sup>112</sup> The military coup that followed was a serious defeat for Qatar, since the Muslim Brotherhood allied with it was thereafter brutally persecuted, and relations between Cairo and Doha deteriorated dramatically.<sup>113</sup> This in turn was mainly due to the fact that many Muslim Brothers fled Egypt to Doha.<sup>114</sup> The fall of Morsi was also a turning point in the conflict with the UAE, which from 2013 onwards tried to push back Qatar's influence in the Arab world and beyond.

Subsequently, the UAE and Saudi Arabia increased the pressure on the emirate. In March 2014 Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Bahrain withdrew their ambassadors from Doha. Alongside this, the three states published lists of terrorist organisations at different times during the year, each of which included the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood and many groups from its circle that Qatar had supported until then. The Qatari leadership finally gave in and called on some Muslim Brotherhood officials to leave Doha. As a result, the conflict subsided somewhat and the ambassadors returned to the Qatari capital in November 2014.<sup>115</sup> However, it quickly became clear that the Qatari leadership — now under the new Emir, Tamim Ibn Hamad Al Thani — did not intend to fundamentally change its regional policy. This was evidenced by its actions in Libya, where militias supported by Qatar played a major role in the Dawn coalition and the capture of Tripoli in summer 2014.

The rise of Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman after 2015 and the assumption of office by Donald Trump in January 2017 improved the context for the UAE such that it could make another attempt to force Qatar to relent. Moreover, many observers believe that US President Trump encouraged Abu Dhabi and Riyadh to take this step. Trump visited Riyadh on 20 and 21 May 2017, just before the next crisis, and met with Mohammed Bin Zayed. The fact that an American president's first trip abroad after his inauguration was to Saudi Arabia was already

**111** Guido Steinberg, *Qatar and the Arab Spring. Support for Islamists and New Anti-Syrian Policy*, SWP Comment 7/2012 (Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, February 2012), <https://www.swp-berlin.org/en/publication/qatar-and-the-arab-spring/> (accessed 20 January 2020).

**112** On Qatari aid to Egypt, see Ulrichsen, *The United Arab Emirates* (see note 4), 200.

**113** Hossam Bahgat and Mostafa Mohie, "Exclusive WikiLeaks Cables Trace Ebb and Flow of Egypt-UAE Relations", *Mada Masr*, 26 July 2015, <https://madamasr.com/en/2015/07/26/feature/politics/exclusive-wikileaks-cables-trace-ebb-and-flow-of-egypt-uae-relations/> (accessed 20 January 2020).

**114** Abigail Hauslohner, "Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood Finds Havens Abroad", *Washington Post*, 6 November 2013, <https://wapo.st/2SgLA0H> (accessed 20 January 2020).

**115** Sailer, *Changed priorities in the Gulf* (see note 67), 2.

unusual and could only be explained by effective Saudi and Emirati lobbying in Washington.<sup>116</sup> Since, during the visit, Donald Trump reaffirmed his intention to put into practice the anti-Iranian strategy announced in his election campaign, and saw Saudi Arabia as an important ally for this policy, it is quite possible that Riyadh and Abu Dhabi felt encouraged to take action against Qatar first.<sup>117</sup>

The conflict escalated with the liberation of Qatari hostages in Iraq in April 2017, which, according to press reports, was linked to millions of dollars in payments to the Iraqi Shiite militia Hezbollah Battalions (Kata'ib Hezbollah) and the Syrian al-Nusra Front (Jabhat al-Nusra), both organisations on the UAE's 2014 terrorism list.<sup>118</sup> For its regional neighbours, the payment was further proof that Doha was supporting terrorists. In response, the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Bahrain and the – admittedly powerless – Yemeni government decided to take a drastic step to put Qatar in its place. On 5 June 2017, they severed diplomatic relations, imposed a total blockade on the emirate, and closed its land, air and sea borders. With the exception of Egypt, all the states mentioned above also ordered their citizens to leave Qatar.<sup>119</sup> Days later, Abu Dhabi and Riyadh confronted the Qatari government with demands that they wanted to see fulfilled within ten days before they would lift the blockade. Among other things, they demanded that the leadership in Doha revoke al-Jazeera's licence, reduce its relations with Iran, and close a Turkish military base on its territory.<sup>120</sup>

If Qatar had accepted the demands, this would have meant the end of its independent foreign policy. It is possible that Abu Dhabi and Riyadh were even aiming to overthrow Emir Tamim Al Thani. The situation was so dramatic in the first few days that the US military briefly feared a Saudi Arabian invasion might ensue. This failed to materialise, and the government in Doha refused to bow to pressure from its neighbours. Instead, it spent billions of dollars securing provisions for the Qatari population, intensified its relations with Turkey and Iran, and continued its regional policy as best it could.<sup>121</sup> In Libya, Qatar together with Turkey continued to support the unity government and other opponents of the UAE – even though Doha reduced its aid while Ankara increased it.<sup>122</sup> The emirate's unwillingness to give in to the demands of its neighbours was also evident in East Africa. In 2018, Qatar used a crisis between the government of Somalia and the UAE to develop its relations with Mogadishu. In 2015, the UAE military had begun training Somali special forces to fight the al-Shabab jihadists. However, a dispute with the Somali government had already arisen in 2017 because Abu Dhabi had set up a base in the port of Berbera in Somaliland, which is de facto independent but legally part of Somalia, and promised to train the army and police there.<sup>123</sup> The UAE reacted to Mogadishu's protests by terminating its training mission for the Somali military in the spring. From then on, Abu Dhabi concentrated its aid on Somaliland and autonomous Puntland, where the Emirati company DP World has been managing and expanding the port of Bosaso since 2017. Qatar immediately stepped in and expanded its support for the Somali government in Mogadishu.<sup>124</sup> In early 2020, there were no signs of a relaxation between the UAE and Qatar.

**116** Kirkpatrick, Hubbard, Landler and Mazzetti, "The Wooing of Jared Kushner" (see note 42).

**117** On this hypothesis, see Anne Barnard and David D. Kirkpatrick, "5 Arab Nations Move to Isolate Qatar, Putting the U.S. in a Bind", *The New York Times*, 5 June 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/06/05/world/middleeast/qatar-saudi-arabia-egypt-bahrain-united-arab-emirates.html> (accessed 20 January 2020).

**118** Robert F. Worth, "Kidnapped Royalty Become Pawns in Iran's Deadly Plot", *The New York Times Magazine*, 14 March 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/03/14/magazine/how-a-ransom-for-royal-falconers-resaped-the-middle-east.html> (accessed 20 January 2020).

**119** Barnard and Kirkpatrick, "5 Arab Nations" (see note 117).

**120** Ben Hubbard, "Arab Nations Demand Qatar Shut Al Jazeera, Cut Islamist Ties and Detail Funding", *The New York Times*, 23 June 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/06/23/world/middleeast/qatar-saudi-arabia-al-jazeera.html> (accessed 20 January 2020).

**121** Ben Hubbard, "That Punishing Blockade? 'We've Moved On,' Qatar Says", *The New York Times*, 19 December 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/12/19/world/middle-east/qatar-blockade-goods.html> (accessed 20 January 2020).

**122** Eric Schmitt and Declan Walsh, "U.S. Missiles Found in Libyan Rebel Camp Were First Sold to France", *The New York Times*, 9 July 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/07/09/world/middleeast/us-missiles-libya-france.html> (accessed 20 January 2020).

**123** Katzman, *The United Arab Emirates* (see note 30), 15f.

**124** Ronen Bergman and David D. Kirkpatrick, "With Guns, Cash and Terrorism, Gulf States Vie for Power in Somalia", *The New York Times*, 22 July 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/07/22/world/africa/somalia-qatar-uae.html> (accessed 20 January 2020).



# Regional Power in the Gulf of Aden and Red Sea

The events in Somaliland and Puntland are also evidence of another important dimension of UAE regional policy: the Emirates' efforts to bring the main ports around the Gulf of Aden under their control. The purpose of this maritime expansion is not entirely clear, as the UAE is pursuing a twin-track approach. On the one hand, the Emirati Navy is setting up military bases, and on the other hand the Dubai-based company DP World is taking over the modernisation, expansion and management of ports. The objectives of this policy are likely to be both geopolitical and commercial.

This expansion of the UAE began with the war in Yemen and the capture of the port city of Aden in 2015. In the following years the Emirati military, together with its Yemeni allies, conquered all major ports of the country except Hodeidah, including Mukalla and Shihr. The fact that the UAE also took control of the Yemeni islands of Perim (at the entrance to the Red Sea) and Socotra (at the entrance to the Gulf of Aden) made the geopolitical focus of its strategy visible. In the first months of the war, the UAE military also established a base on the East African coast opposite Yemen. The first choice was Djibouti, whose civilian port DP World had already deepened and modernised in the 2000s.<sup>125</sup> In the spring of 2015, the Emirati leadership therefore planned to make Djibouti the starting point for the war in Yemen. However, a conflict between Emirati diplomats and the head of the Djibouti air force in April of the same year led to a breakdown of diplomatic relations and forced the UAE to change its plans. The UAE now relied on the Eritrean Assab, where the Emirati military, in return for generous aid to the host country, expanded the disused deep-sea port and the nearby air base as bases for the war in

Yemen, and used them intensively in the following years.<sup>126</sup>

When the UAE subsequently expanded its presence in the Somali ports of Berbera and Bosaso, it became clear that it was preparing for a longer-term stay around the Gulf of Aden and the Bab al-Mandab Strait. This did not change even after the withdrawal of most UAE troops from Yemen in 2019, since the Emiratis retained control of several ports and islands, leaving a small contingent in Aden for the time being. Moreover, where UAE troops withdrew, the militias allied with them stayed behind. These militias are heavily dependent on Emirati support, so Abu Dhabi seems to assume that they will remain loyal in the future.

**All around the Gulf of Aden, the UAE have now created a small maritime empire.**

The goal of this Emirati expansion is likely to be military and economic. With a continued presence in the ports around the Gulf of Aden, the UAE can intervene in Yemen at any time. Simultaneously, the management of the many ports by DP World serves the commercial interests of the UAE; the Emirates are banking on diversification and want to prevent transshipment points on the south coast of the Arabian Peninsula or in the Horn of Africa from becoming a competitor to their own major port of Jebel Ali. Considering all the sites outside its national territory that the UAE controls militarily or economically, it is obvious that it has created a small maritime empire around the edge of the Gulf of Aden.

<sup>125</sup> Krane, *City of Gold* (see note 12), 140.

<sup>126</sup> Alex Mello and Michael Knights, "West of Suez for the United Arab Emirates", *War on the Rocks*, 2 September 2016, <https://warontherocks.com/2016/09/west-of-suez-for-the-united-arab-emirates/> (accessed 7 July 2020).

Whether or not the Emirates' expansion has already reached its limits will only become apparent in the coming years. The partial withdrawal from Yemen is an indication that the UAE initially intends to act more cautiously. At the same time, beyond its presence in several ports and strategically important islands, there are also signs that the UAE is showing continued interest in the Red Sea. Perhaps the most important is its engagement in Sudan. Since the beginning of the war in Yemen, Abu Dhabi sought to strengthen cooperation with the regime of Omar al-Bashir, which provided mercenaries to the UAE and Saudi Arabia.<sup>127</sup> However, Bashir also maintained good relations with Turkey and Qatar.<sup>128</sup> Abu Dhabi and Riyadh ultimately prevailed over their rivals when Bashir was overthrown and arrested by the military in April 2019 after months of popular protest. The two Gulf States pledged \$3 billion to the newly formed military council in Khartoum to stabilise Sudan. According to press reports, the military leadership also arrested Islamists from Bashir's entourage who are close to Qatar and Turkey.<sup>129</sup> However, protests continued and, following a massacre of more than 100 demonstrators by the Rapid Support Forces (Quwwat ad-Da'm al-Sari') of the powerful General Mohammed Hamdan Dagalo (Hemeti) on 3 June, Riyadh and Abu Dhabi appear to have urged the Military Council to adopt a more moderate course.<sup>130</sup> The ensuing talks between the rulers and the opposition movement culminated in an agreement that provides for a joint transitional government for the next three years.<sup>131</sup> In Sudan, as in Egypt, the UAE's

main concern after the overthrow of the authoritarian regime is likely to be to ensure that the military remains a force of political stability and to prevent representatives of any protest movement from assuming full power. All in all, it is obvious that since 2015 the Emirates have been showing an increased military, political and economic presence along the route from the Gulf of Oman via the Gulf of Aden to the Red Sea and the Suez Canal. This indicates that, beyond the fight against the Islamists, they are pursuing a geopolitical vision aimed at co-control of the sea routes around the Arabian Peninsula.

<sup>127</sup> Katzman, *The United Arab Emirates* (see note 30), 16.

<sup>128</sup> Yoel Guzansky and Gil Hurvitz, *A Port Rush: Competition for Control of Trade Routes*, INSS Insight no. 1200 (Tel Aviv: The Institute for National Security Studies [INSS], 5 August 2019), <https://www.inss.org.il/publication/a-port-rush-competition-for-control-of-trade-routes/> (accessed 20 January 2020).

<sup>129</sup> Taylor Luck, "Why the Arab Battle for Democracy Now Runs through Sudan", *The Christian Science Monitor*, 23 April 2019, <https://www.csmonitor.com/World/Middle-East/2019/0423/Why-the-Arab-battle-for-democracy-now-runs-through-Sudan> (accessed 20 January 2020).

<sup>130</sup> Declan Walsh, "In Sudan, a Power-Sharing Deal Propelled by a Secret Meeting and Public Rage", *The New York Times*, 5 July 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/07/05/world/africa/sudan-power-sharing-deal.html> (accessed 20 January 2020).

<sup>131</sup> Denis Dumo, "South Sudan Parties Agree to Form Interim Government by November 12", *Reuters*, 11 September 2019, [https://www.reuters.com/article/us-southsudan-politics-](https://www.reuters.com/article/us-southsudan-politics-government/south-sudan-parties-agree-to-form-interim-government-by-november-12-idUSKCN1VW1HO)

[government/south-sudan-parties-agree-to-form-interim-government-by-november-12-idUSKCN1VW1HO](https://www.reuters.com/article/us-southsudan-politics-government/south-sudan-parties-agree-to-form-interim-government-by-november-12-idUSKCN1VW1HO) (accessed 20 January 2020).

# De-escalation in Yemen and the Persian Gulf

The partial withdrawal of its armed forces from Yemen was accompanied by visible efforts by the UAE to reduce tensions with Iran. Already after the first attacks on tankers in May 2019, the Emirati Minister of State for Foreign Affairs, Anwar Gargash, who often acts as the mouthpiece of the UAE government in such instances, repeatedly called for a de-escalation and held to this line even after Iran shot down an American drone in June 2019: “Tensions in the Gulf can only be addressed politically. Crisis long in the making requires collective attention; primarily to de-escalate & to find political solutions thru dialogue & negotiations. Regional voices important to achieve sustainable solutions.”<sup>132</sup> Foreign Minister Abdullah Bin Zayed also expressed similar views on several occasions. This heralded the end of a phase of Emirati policy that had begun in 2011 and during which the UAE, together with Saudi Arabia, had attempted to limit and, if possible, reduce Iran’s growing influence in the region with sometimes aggressive action.

An important motive for the more active regional policy that the UAE decided to adopt at the beginning of the decade was the perception by the Abu Dhabi government that it could no longer rely on the Obama administration, since the latter was not interested in the stability of pro-Western governments and was working towards a balance with Tehran. Similarly, the Trump administration’s unwillingness to take military action against Iran in 2019 may also have played a role in the decision to de-escalate. The events in May and June 2019 in the Gulf of Oman and the Straits of Hormuz had made Abu Dhabi aware of how vulnerable the Emirates’ economy was, and how aggressively the Iranian leadership could take action against US allies without having to worry about retaliation. The Emirates feared that they would not be protected by

the US in the event of a conflict because it was becoming increasingly clear that the Trump administration, despite all its rhetoric, was shying away from a military confrontation with Iran.

In the months that followed, the Emirati leadership held to this line and tried not to provoke Iran. But while Abu Dhabi held talks with Tehran on maritime security in August, it decided to join the US-led naval mission to ensure the safety of civilian shipping from Iranian assaults following the attacks on the Abqaiq and Khurais oil facilities.<sup>133</sup> Nor was it a purely conciliatory signal that the UAE withdrew its remaining troops from Aden in October to facilitate a peace agreement between the Hadi government and Abu Dhabi-backed separatists, which was reached in November. This move was aimed at restoring the unity of the Houthis’ Yemeni opponents.<sup>134</sup> It remained unclear whether the ulterior motive was to continue the war or to emphasise the unity of the pro-Saudi and pro-Emirati camp in the peace talks between Saudi Arabia and the Houthis in Oman that followed. Overall, however, the UAE seems to have no interest in further escalation for the time being. Meanwhile, Emirati politicians have held fast to their demands for de-escalation and political solutions to the conflicts in the region.<sup>135</sup> That this was more than mere rhetoric was demonstrated by the UAE’s reaction to the targeted killing of Iranian Revolutionary Guard General Qassem Soleimani in Baghdad in early January 2020.

133 “UAE Joins International Coalition to Protect Oil Shipping”, *BBC Monitoring Middle East*, 19 September 2019.

134 “Yemen’s Government Signs Peace Deal with Southern Rebels”, *The New York Times*, 5 November 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/11/05/world/middleeast/yemen-peace-southern-separatists.html> (accessed 20 January 2020).

135 See, e.g., “UAE Expects ‘Decisive’ Twelve Months Ahead”, H.E. Dr Anwar Gargash Tells Annual Abu Dhabi Strategic Debate”, *UAE Government News*, 10 November 2019, <https://www.mofaic.gov.ae/en/mediahub/news/2019/11/10/10-11-2019-uae-minister> (accessed 20 January 2020).

132 Tweet by Dr Anwar Gargash, 23 June 2019, <https://twitter.com/AnwarGargash/status/1142714628646068225> (accessed 20 January 2020).

Gargash again made a verbose appeal to all those involved to avoid confrontation.<sup>136</sup> Whether the UAE will maintain this stance if the conflict between Washington and Tehran escalates further cannot yet be determined.

**136** Tweet by Dr Anwar Gargash, 3 January 2020, <http://bit.ly/2RQ5xez> (accessed 20 January 2020).

# Recommendations for German Policy

The rise of the UAE to a regional power has made the country a more important and simultaneously a more problematic partner for German and European policy in and towards the Middle East. The Emirates are more important today above all because they influence the political situation in many more countries (and conflicts) than before 2011, including the Gulf States and Yemen, as well as Somalia, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Sudan, Egypt and Libya. In relation to Iran, too, they are one of the most significant Middle Eastern actors, and one that also has influence on the Trump administration. Nevertheless, the UAE is more problematic than before 2011 because its goals, strategies and means are often not compatible with those of Germany and Europe. This applies, for example, to its conduct in the Yemen war, a war that destroyed the country and made Iran a key player there in the first place. But it also applies to the promotion of coups d'état such as that by General al-Sisi in Egypt; support for the military against the protest movement in Sudan; and aid for General Haftar in Libya in his fight against the unity government. Since mid-2019, however, Abu Dhabi has visibly been working towards de-escalation and also towards talks with Tehran. This could indicate that it has come to the conclusion that it may have overblown its aggressive approach towards Iran. This should eliminate at least one significant difference of opinion between the UAE and Europe.

Despite all the problems, closer political relations with the UAE should be an important goal of German Middle East policy. The geopolitical focus of the Middle East has shifted eastwards since the 1970s — from Israel and Egypt to the Persian Gulf. As a result of this shift, the Gulf States have become more important and the UAE is Germany's main partner there, alongside Saudi Arabia. The frequent differences of opinion between Berlin and Abu Dhabi are due to the fact that the Emirati government's worldview is strongly based on security policy categories. Since the US

under President Obama distanced itself from its allies in the Gulf, conflicts between the Emirates and Europe have intensified because the UAE has frequently opposed with considerable aggressiveness the rise of Islamists in the region and the expansion of Iran, alone or in alliance with Saudi Arabia. This should not cloud the fact that Germany and the UAE have partly congruent interests.

A particularly important common interest is that of combating Islamist terrorism. The UAE is an important and reliable partner in this area, since it is fighting transnational groups such as the IS and al Qaida resolutely and effectively. One problem is that Abu Dhabi cooperates with Salafist forces in Yemen, and also in Libya, so long as they claim to be loyal partners who do not want to carry the armed struggle beyond their home country. One task for Germany and the EU should be to convince the Emirates of the dangers of such an approach, because the Salafists they support and the jihadists they fight, such as IS or al-Qaida, differ only in nuances. Another problem is that the Emirates' concept of terrorism is much broader and includes the Muslim Brotherhood. Here, Germany and Europe should firmly disagree and make clear that the Muslim Brotherhood as a whole cannot be categorised as terrorist, because it does not use violence. The situation is different for Shiite Islamists, who are also listed as terrorist organisations by the UAE. Germany and Europe should consider whether Abu Dhabi does not in some cases have a more realistic view of these groups. This applies, for example, to Iraqi Shiite militias such as Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq and Kata'ib Hezbollah. They are undoubtedly terrorist organisations and should be pursued as such by Europeans as well.

Common policy interests can also be identified concerning Iran. There is evidently significant dissent over the nuclear agreement — the UAE has welcomed the US withdrawal, while the Europeans continue to support the treaty. However, Tehran's continued an-

nouncements (most recently in January 2020) that it will expand uranium enrichment beyond the limits set out in the agreement could remove the basis for European policy, and make the question of what other means can be used to prevent Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons more urgent. The UAE will then be an important interlocutor. Furthermore, Iran has significantly increased its influence in the Arab world since 2011, mostly in cooperation with Shiite Islamist groups that have committed numerous crimes against their opponents and the civilian population, and undermined states such as Iraq, Syria, Lebanon and Yemen from within. Germany and Europe have an interest in preventing this expansion as well as Iran's continued missile armament. Since the Iranian attacks on oil tankers in June and the attack on Saudi Arabian oil facilities in September 2019, Tehran has also jeopardised the security of oil exports. The Gulf States must protect themselves against their aggressive neighbour, and it is therefore both important and logical that the UAE should continue to expand and modernise its military. Arms exports to the Emirates should therefore continue to be permitted and, if necessary, be expanded.

## Abbreviations

GCC	Gulf Cooperation Council
IS	Islamic State
LNA	Libyan National Army
LNG	liquefied natural gas
MESA	Middle East Strategic Alliance
STC	Southern Transitional Council (al-Majlis al-Intiqali al-Janubi; Yemen)
THAAD	Terminal High Altitude Area Defence
UAE	United Arab Emirates
UN	United Nations

